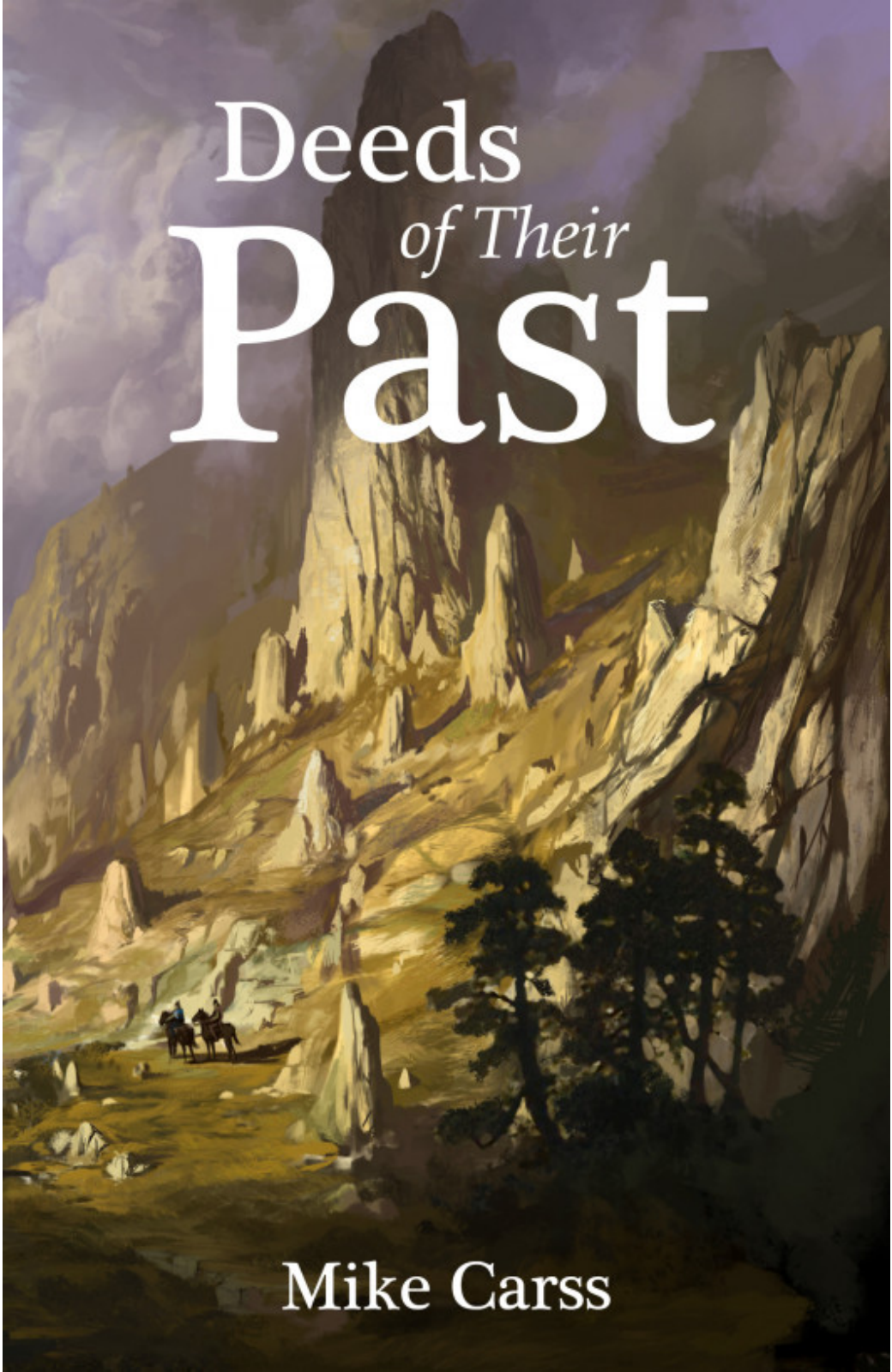
Deeds
of Their
Past
Mike Carss

Deeds of Their Past
by Mike Carss

Smashwords Edition
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Thanks to Scott, Eli, and Chuck
for their valuable time, insight, and suggestions

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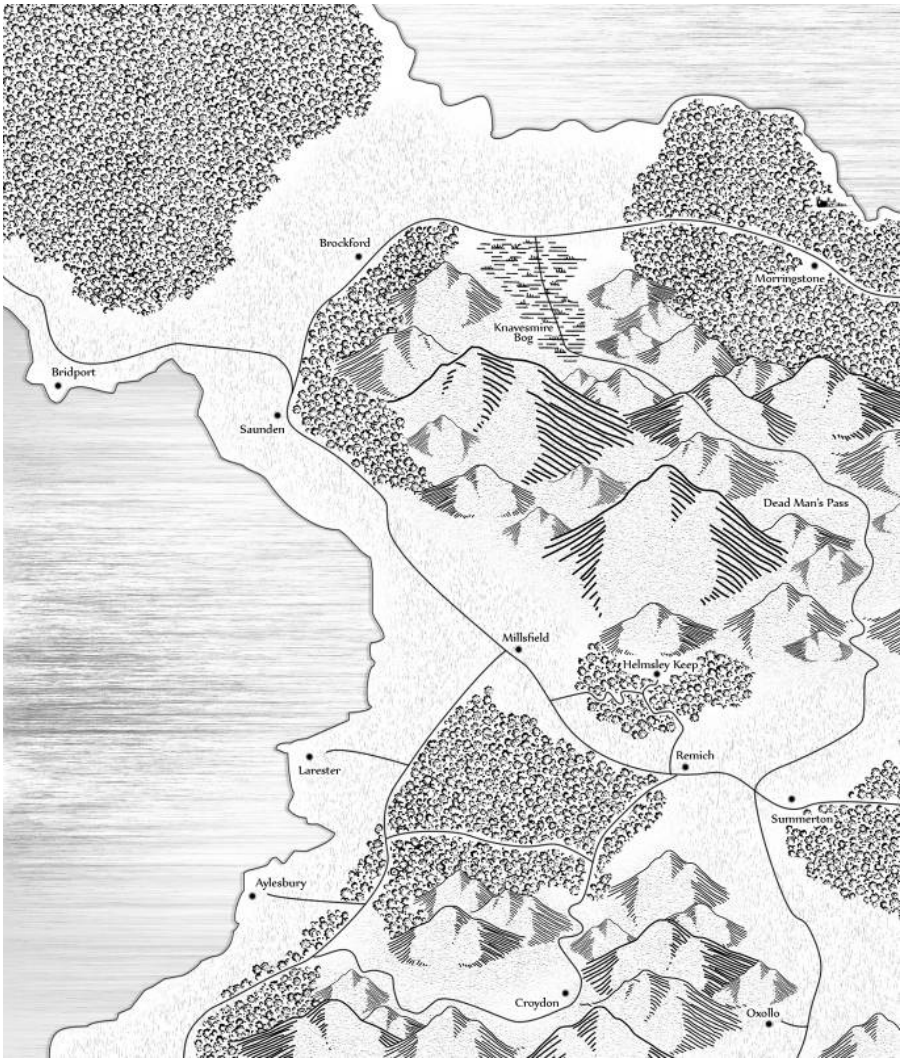
Brockford
Morringstone
Knavesmire Bog
Bridport
Saunden
Dead Man's Pass
Millsfield
Helmsley Keep
Larester
Remich
Summerton
Aylesbury
Croydon
Oxollo

CHAPTER ONE

Faded hues of twilight painted the sky, casting its dim light over a well-travelled road that cut through open grasslands. A hooded traveller urged his galloping horse west, and in the distance, the small farming village of Summerton came into view. The Willow Inn, a sizable building in comparison to the rest of the village, sat on the outskirts. Journey's end in sight, he slowed his frothing, tired horse. He'd pushed the beast hard over the past four days, yet it'd stayed the course without complaint.

As the rider approached, the murmur of folk talking and laughing told him the inn was packed. He dismounted and led his horse to a wooden stable nearby, meeting a young man who took the reins.

"Once he cools off, be sure to feed and water him," the hooded man said, patting the horse's neck in silent thanks for its hard work. "And give him a good brushing."

"Yes, sir."

"Good lad."

He tossed a coin, deftly caught by the stablehand. A sudden gust of cool wind blew by, causing the massive willow tree nearby to rustle. A shiver ran up his spine and he peered about in curiosity, yet as quickly as it came, the wind disappeared.

None of the patrons noticed his arrival as he entered the tavern. They were a rowdy bunch, but not completely out of control. Some were eating, but most were enjoying their drink.

A loud belly laugh filled the room, coming from the owner behind the bar. He was a large jovial man with ruddy cheeks, wearing a dirty apron with a towel over his shoulder. The hooded man approached the bar, away from the others, and signalled inconspicuously to him. The barkeep excused himself from the conversation and walked over, leaning close to speak over the noise.

"You're late," he grumbled. "I'm sure I don't need to tell you our clients pay good money for prompt service."

The man pulled back his hood, revealing a calm face. "Samuel, as soon as I received your message, I made my way here immediately," he said in a hushed tone.

"That was nearly a fortnight ago. I've had two visits since the original arrangement, and they're not happy. To appease them, I offered a twenty-five percent discount."

The traveller looked displeased. "You couldn't come up with an excuse?"

"Gods, I can't lie to save my life. You know that."

The man grunted and shook his head slightly, his mouth twisted in the slightest grin.

Samuel dropped the towel onto the bar. "Come on back, and I'll fill you in on the details for the job."

"Can't we do this in the morning? I haven't eaten all day, and my back is killing me."

"No, I'll give you the details first, then you can eat. I want you out of here before dawn."

The man sighed and followed Samuel into the kitchen. The cook was tending to something in a large pot, and it smelled delicious. Samuel invited him into the back room and closed the door. A single oil lamp lit in one corner provided adequate illumination.

"I'll be honest. I was worried something happened to you," the barkeep said as he sat behind his desk.

The man dropped his rucksack and sat down, offering Samuel a sly smile. “I can’t imagine what force of man or nature that could take me.”

Samuel laughed. “That smug attitude will be your undoing, my friend.”

“Should we get down to business?”

“Right. There’s been an embarrassing situation involving the son of Lord Helmsley and a peasant girl who lives outside his keep. The crafty bitch wooed the boy into divulging some delicate information, and now is trying to blackmail them for coin.

“Of course, Helmsley can’t trust that she’ll keep her mouth shut even if he does pay her, so he’d prefer a permanent solution to his problem.”

“Did they have a preferred method?”

“They want it to look natural.”

“Poison then.”

Samuel nodded and handed the man a silver signet ring. “Wear this ring and show it to the guards when you arrive at the keep. It’ll tell them who you are.”

The man slipped the ring on his finger and examined it closely. “Looks like quality silver. Can I keep it after the job is done?” he asked with a smirk.

Samuel rolled his eyes. “You can ask him when you get there. The keep is two or three days northwest, depending how hard you ride.”

“I’ve heard the northern road past Remich can be treacherous. That’ll slow me down.”

“Given your tardiness, I’d suggest you be there within two days.”

The man sighed and offered a tired smile. “You’re a slave driver. Fine, two days. I’ll leave just before dawn as you asked.” He stood up and turned to leave, picking up his belongings. “Now I’m begging you, feed me! My stomach thinks my throat’s been cut—”

“Nathan . . .”

The man glanced back at Samuel.

“Be careful. I have to admit something didn’t seem right about the whole affair.”

“Could you be more specific?”

Brows knitted in worry, Samuel laid a hand on his shoulder. “It’s just a gut feeling. Promise me you’ll watch your back.”

“I haven’t lived this long by being careless. Don’t worry, I’ll be fine.”

Nathan walked out of the kitchen with a steaming plate of roast pork and vegetables. He sat in a quiet corner with his back to the wall, and tucked into his meal. Samuel arrived soon after, offering a loaf of bread and a tankard of ale, and pulled up a chair to sit at the table.

“So tell me, what were you doing that was so important that you missed your message pickup?”

“You’re prying,” Nathan said between mouthfuls of food.

Samuel smiled. “We’ve known each other for too long to keep secrets between us. You’re always so distant. Don’t you trust me?”

“Of course. But I’ve told you before. The less you know, the better.”

Samuel sighed. “At least tell me a good excuse, and I’ll use it next time you’re late for a job.”

Nathan didn’t miss a beat. “I was on another assignment, and my mark wasn’t where he was supposed to be. Needless to say, it took extra time to track him down.”

“I like it. Simple and believable.”

Nathan winked as he tore a chunk of bread and dunked it into the meat juices. “That’s the idea.”

“I’ll let you finish. Come see me when you’re heading up, and I’ll get hot

water to your room so you can clean yourself up. You smell like a horse."

Nathan stopped chewing and sniffed loudly. "I hadn't noticed."

Samuel chuckled as he walked away. Nathan pondered what he'd said about being distant. A rule he'd made for himself years ago was to always keep those he cared about at bay. Samuel was one of very few he confided in, but Nathan saw him more as a business partner than a friend. Yet as the years passed, the line between partner and friend blurred, and that terrified him.

The boisterous laughter of drunken patrons broke his thoughts, and he suddenly realized he was very tired. His meal finished, he started his way up the stairs leading to the rented rooms, and caught the barkeep's attention.

"Mary'll get hot water for you," Samuel yelled over the din.

Nathan nodded and headed to his room. As part of their deal, Samuel gave him free board and permanent quarters. He unlocked the door with an iron key and entered the stuffy room.

After tossing his cloak onto a chair in the corner of the room, he swung open the window, welcomed by a prominent chorus of crickets. He stumbled his way in the dark to a short dresser, felt for the tinderbox there and lit a candle. A knock came while he was unbuttoning his doublet.

"Hello?" Mary's muffled voice came from the other side of the door.

Nathan opened it and ushered the young woman in. He knew that the shy girl found him attractive, and while he had no interest in her, he enjoyed making her blush.

"Hello Mary, how are you this fine evening?" he asked with a roguish smile.

Noticing he was undressing, she nervously stared down at the floor. "I'm well. Th-thank you, sir."

She offered a small towel, rough cloth and soap, then poured steaming water from a jug into a large bowl sitting on the dresser.

He stepped toward her, standing closely beside. "Thank you, Mary."

She glanced over a moment, flustered, as he took her hand and placed a coin on her palm.

"For your troubles," he whispered in her ear.

Her face flushed beet red. "Thank you," she managed to blurt out before bolting out of the room, slamming the door behind her.

With a chuckle, he finished undressing and walked over to the bowl to wash himself. Although what he really wanted was a proper bath, scrubbing his skin with the warm, soapy cloth was adequate enough. Water streamed down his lean muscular frame, yet he managed to catch it with the cloth before it hit the floor. Dunking his short brown hair into the bowl, he scrubbed out the dust from the road.

After drying himself, he wandered over to the window to gaze out at the moonlit countryside. He began to yawn as another mysterious icy gust of wind blew into the room across his naked body. The flame blew out, and he shivered in the dark from the sudden cold. As before, the wind subsided and all was calm again.

He latched the window closed, padded over to the bed, and slipped beneath the sheets. The din from downstairs was still audible, but offered a drone that he found soothing, allowing him to fall asleep almost immediately.

* * *

The sun, sitting just above the horizon, warmed Nathan's back as he hit the road west. To reach Helmsley Keep within two days, he'd have to make it to the town of Remich by nightfall, nearly ten hours away.

The morning passed uneventfully, aside from crossing a few riders and a travelling merchant. The flat grasslands allowed for easy travel, and he was making good time.

As the sun reached its peak, he stopped at a lone oak tree, and ate a simple meal of biscuits and salted beef given to him by Samuel. After a quick stretch, he wasted no time and continued west toward Remich.

The easy ride carried on through the afternoon hours. He enjoyed it, knowing the next day would be slower in the mountainous terrain that surrounded the keep.

An hour before sunset, the walls surrounding the town of Remich came into view. An overweight guard stood at the open gate, leaning on his pike, clearly bored. Remich was a bustling town, but violence and theft were a rare occurrence—a surprising fact given the seedy characters who lived there. He pulled back his hood halfway, so not to look suspicious, however the guard didn't notice his arrival or give him a second glance. Nathan chuckled inwardly, wishing it were always so easy to pass guard posts.

While the few main roads were wide and well kept, most of the town consisted of narrow, haphazard streets and alleyways. After a short trot, dodging other riders and townsfolk, Nathan arrived at The Black Lamb, his usual haunt. The inn had a particularly large stable, which he used to rest his horse for the night. After a chat with the stable master, he drew his hood forward and headed north on a crooked street.

Golden streaks of sunlight streamed between buildings, and the clamour of the busy main road diminished. Children playing games ran past Nathan. Their laughter echoed among the ramshackle buildings and houses, joining in the hum of the town.

He veered into a narrow alleyway, now deep in shadow as dusk was nearly upon the town, stopping at a rough, wooden door. He knocked.

No answer.

He knocked again, harder this time. Still no answer.

Nathan peered both ways to make sure nobody was coming, and then tried the doorknob, but found it locked. Giving up, he turned back the way he came.

Suddenly, a man hidden in the gloom of a small alcove appeared from behind. Before Nathan could react, the attacker grabbed his cloak and threw him off balance, holding a sharp knife to his throat. The man reeked of alcohol.

"Knockin' on wrong doors can get you kill't, friend."

Nathan, angry with himself for being caught off-guard, had already planned three ways to kill his attacker. However, as soon as the man had spoken, he knew it wouldn't be necessary.

"Danny, you drunken fool. It's me."

The man wasn't about to give up what he thought was the upper hand. "I don't know you! Gimme a reason I shoun't slit yer throat from ear to ear."

"It's Nathan," he said plainly.

"Wha—"

The man spun Nathan around and pulled back his hood to reveal an impish smile. "Gods, Nathan. I wasn't foolin'," he said, waving the knife.

Nathan laughed. "An old woman is safe from you and that blade of yours."

Danny chuckled and slapped Nathan roughly on the back. "It's been too long, friend."

"I know. I've been busy, and work hasn't brought me this way until now."

"Work, work. There's more t'life than that, isn't there?"

Nathan ignored the question as they entered Danny's home. "So tell me, do you usually hide in shadows waiting to attack people?"

Danny chuckled again, pulling out two glasses and a bottle of liquor. "I was comin' back from th' tavern, and saw a dangerous lookin' man knockin' at m'door. I wasn't gonna take any chances, you know?"

Nathan nodded. "Yeah. Listen, you're going to hate me for this, but I actually came here on business."

"Drinks first!"

"One drink."

Danny started pouring, smiling devilishly with eyes wide. "I'll make't a big drink then."

They chatted for a while, catching up on news and stories they heard. Danny was a valuable asset with many connections, and was able to procure items that one couldn't buy from any merchant. Nathan never understood how Danny managed to reach the position he was in, given he was inebriated most of the time.

"Alright Danny. I hate to cut this lovely reunion short, but I have a long ride tomorrow and I want to get some sleep."

"Oh, com'on now. One more can't hurt?"

Danny lifted the bottle, but Nathan covered his glass with a hand and shook his head.

"Ahh, fine." Danny poured himself another glass. "So what do y'need from me then?"

"Deathcap, preferably dried and ground to powder."

"Aye, that I have . . . I think I do."

Danny stood up, staggered to a tall cupboard along the far wall, and shifted through a series of small bottles. After a moment, he returned with a clear vial, shaking a slight amount of white powder within.

"Whad'ya know, I've got this bit left. Enough for ya?"

Nathan untied the coin purse hanging from his belt. "That should do fine. How much?"

Danny considered the bottle. "Make it ten silver."

While Nathan counted, Danny sat down and continued drinking. Nathan stacked the coins neatly on the table and took the vial.

"Thanks Danny, always a pleasure. Sorry for not staying longer."

"S'okay. Don't be a stranger," he said with a toothy grin.

"I'll try my best. Take care of yourself, and maybe lay off the drink?"

"Screw off!" Danny slurred, attempting to stand.

"Don't worry, I'll see myself out," Nathan said with a grin.

As soon as he opened the door, a gust of cold wind blew in. Papers on a nearby shelf flew onto the floor.

"What's goin' on out there?"

The wind dispersed, and Nathan suddenly felt something wasn't right. "Uh, I'm not sure. Rogue wind?" he suggested lamely, shrugging his shoulders.

"Never heard o' it."

"Goodnight, my friend."

He closed the door behind him and peered down both directions of the alleyway. It was dark, but he still could make out enough detail from the lamplight in the windows to find his way out.

The uneasy feeling subsided, and he wondered if he was being paranoid. It was just wind. After pulling his hood forward, he started back the way he came, paying close attention to the small recesses where Danny had caught him earlier. Reaching the deserted street, he was surprised to find it strangely silent aside from a few chirping crickets.

It didn't take long to reach The Black Lamb, and once inside, found the usual rabble within. They were loud and boisterous, and Nathan wasn't in the mood for such company. He spoke with the barkeep, Griff, about renting a room for the night, and took a meal with him to the relative quiet of his room.

While he ate, his thoughts returned to the curious wind that seemed to follow him. Goosebumps covered his skin, and he shivered despite the sweat upon his brow. He peered about the small room, lit by a candle, feeling as though eyes were watching him. He glanced over at the window, wanting to open it for some fresh air, but decided against it. Instead, he undressing, blew out the candle, and lay in bed. Uneasy thoughts filled his mind for hours before sleep finally took him.

* * *

Nathan rode out of Remich early the next morning. Gathering clouds burned a deep crimson hue, and while he appreciated its beauty, it was a sure sign of foul weather to come.

A league outside of town, he arrived at the north road that led to the keep, and gazed upon a layered landscape where grassy foothills met a forest of evergreens. Beyond, a vast mountain range towered above, their snowy peaks reaching for the clouds.

Those same clouds gradually filled the sky as the morning progressed. Smaller trees gave way to towering pines, muting the light of day. A bed of fallen needles muffled his horse's hooves, allowing him to enjoy the birdsong among the boughs.

Hours passed with nobody in sight, and while he'd never travelled this road before, he expected to cross paths with someone by now. However, being close to his destination, this was to his advantage. The fewer he met, the easier it would be to cover his tracks if needed.

Ahead, a steep mountain face broke the monotony of endless trees, forcing the road to switchback its way up. It narrowed considerably, the hard dirt road giving way to crumbling rock, and he allowed his mount to grow accustomed to the new terrain before pushing on.

By late afternoon, the grey clouds grew ominous, bringing with it the telltale scent of rain, and he silently cursed the sky. Large solitary drops

announced the arrival of the storm, and he pulled his hood farther forward as the rain began to fall unabated. He caught a glimpse of a small outcropping in the rock, and took shelter to wait out the worst of the torrential rainfall.

Leaning against the stone wall, he ate the last of the salted meat, watching a fog rise from the sea of trees below. Layers of treetops slowly disappeared in the gathering mist. The storm blew itself out quickly, leaving behind gentle showers, and he continued on his way.

Upon reaching a split in the road an hour later, he turned north. Continued rain soaked through his cloak, leaving him shivering cold, but knowing he was on the final leg of his journey offered a small solace. The mountainous landscape flattened out, and evergreens grew in earnest. Despite the day's climb, he was still at the base of the mountain range, and he marvelled at the huge peaks towering overhead. Amid the gloom, the keep appeared in the distance, and Nathan could appreciate the defensive might that such a location provided.

By the time he arrived, the sky was dark and rain still sprinkled down. He dismounted, leading his horse the final few steps to the keep's gated entrance, guarded by two pikemen. Even for simple gatekeepers, they appeared to be a force to be reckoned with. Black tabards, bearing the red coat of arms of the kingdom, lay atop thick chainmail. Sturdy plate protected their legs, and they wore heavy black leather boots and gauntlets. As he emerged into the torchlight, the two men snapped to attention.

"Halt! State your business," the guard on his left said, his face obscured under a half helm.

"My name is Nathan," he said, pulling back the wet hood and presenting the signet ring Samuel had given him. "I seek an audience with Lord Helmsley. He's been expecting me."

In unison, the two men nervously glanced at each other. "Right away, sir," the lead pikeman said before banging loudly on the iron bars. "Open up! And we'll need an escort."

After a moment, two more similarly armoured guards appeared on the other side, turning a large crank to open the portcullis. Once secured, the lead pikeman pulled one man aside, speaking quietly to him. Meanwhile, the other pikeman stepped up, offering to take the reins.

"We'll care for your horse during your stay, sir."

Nathan handed him the reins and nodded his thanks, trying to hear the hushed conversation, yet it quickly ended and the lead pikeman beckoned Nathan to join them.

"Tarn here will escort you," he said, gesturing to the burly guard. "I trust you will enjoy your stay at Helmsley Keep."

Tarn ushered Nathan into the courtyard, following closely behind. Two guards flanked the main entrance of the keep, and in perfect time, they marched from their post to open the large wooden doors. Once through, the solid doors shut behind them with a boom that reverberated in the grand hall.

"If you'll just wait here a moment," Tarn said, stepping over to sentry standing at the entrance of a hallway.

Another quiet conversation. Nathan strained his ears for details but still couldn't catch any words. After the brief chat, the sentry nodded at the guard's instruction and headed down the hallway. Tarn returned to Nathan offering a friendly smile, and removing a nearby torch from a sconce, he motioned to the stairs.

"I'll see you to your quarters while Lord Helmsley is made known of your arrival."

He led Nathan through a series of corridors until arriving at a nondescript door. He entered, placing the torch in a bracket, lighting a welcoming bedroom with lavish furnishings.

"Someone will arrive soon with food and drink. Make yourself comfortable, and I'll be back shortly," Tarn said, smiling warmly again.

Nathan nodded his thanks, and the guard closed the door behind him. He thought it strange that while other guards seemed nervous of Nathan's arrival, Tarn was just a friendly guy. He liked him.

He removed his sodden cloak and hung it to dry near the fireplace. Nearby lay kindling and wood logs, and he quickly had a fire burning. While warming himself, a commotion outside his window caught his attention. He peered out to find clear view of the courtyard, and four armoured men on horseback galloped into the darkness beyond the keep. He thought it strange to travel at such a time, and in such miserable weather.

A knock at the door gave him a jump. Before he could answer, a small woman swept in carrying a tray of food.

"I apologize for the delay. I could've taken care of that," she said, motioning at the lit fireplace.

Nathan smiled and raised his hands. "Honestly, it was no trouble."

With wide eyes, she caught sight of the silver ring around his finger, and avoided his gaze with a reddening face. After placing the tray on a table near the fireplace, she lit large candles discreetly placed around the room. Their glow added to the welcoming nature of his quarters.

"You're wet," she said. "I'll have a hot bath prepared for you. Please eat, and I'll return in short order."

"My thanks," Nathan said with a nod.

Face still red, she fled out of the room and closed the door. Perplexed, he examined the simple silver ring. What did it mean to them?

A rumbling stomach broke his thoughts, and upon seeing the tray of delicious meats, bread, cheese and fruits, he realized he was ravenous. He jumped into the over-sized plush chair near the fireplace and ate quickly, taking little time to savour his meal. Once his belly was satiated, he poured wine from an ornate carafe into a goblet and drank leisurely, stretched out on the chair and staring into the roaring fire. After draining his third cup, a knock at the door broke his relaxed state.

"Come in."

The door opened and Tarn entered halfway. "I apologize for the intrusion, sir."

Nathan was growing weary of the special treatment, and in his partially inebriated state, tried to put the guard at ease. "Tarn, my friend. Come in. What news do you have?"

Tarn seemed unsure of Nathan's tone, yet stepped in with a small smile on his round face. "I'm sorry to inform you that Lord Helmsley will be unable to grant you an audience this evening. He's been held up on other matters."

"Well, that's understandable. I certainly didn't expect him to drop everything just to see me."

"Very well," Tarn said, turning to leave. "Is there anything I can do for you?"

"As a matter of fact, there is," Nathan said with a smile, patting the empty seat beside him. "Why don't you rest your feet a moment?"

"Uhhm . . ."

With fidgety fingers, the guard glanced at the seat and then back at the door, seemingly at a loss of what to do. Finally, he bolstered his courage and joined

him by the fire. Moving his scabbard out of the way, he sat down, looking uncomfortable.

"I'm going to ask you a question you may find bizarre, but please bear with me."

Nathan held out his hand bearing the ring. Tarn, head still, eyed the ring for a moment before looking back at Nathan.

"What in hells does this mean?" Nathan asked, pointing at the ring.

"Sir . . . is this a test?"

"What? No," Nathan chuckled. "Please, I just need to know what this ring means to you."

"It means you're an honoured guest to Lord Helmsley. The ring you bear signifies that you are to be treated with the same respect as the Lord Helmsley himself."

Nathan laughed. "Well, that explains why everyone's been acting so *proper* around me. You've got to understand I'm not used to this kind of treatment."

"We receive few visitors who bear that ring. You must be a man of import," Tarn said straight-faced, as though it was fact.

Nathan chuckled and patted the guard on the shoulder, causing him to jump. "I was asked to see Lord Helmsley to complete a task, but I'm certainly not an important man. Rest easy, my friend."

A grin grew on Tarn's face. "I assumed you were royalty."

Nathan gestured at his simple clothes. "Do I look like royalty to you?"

"No, I suppose not. I admit I was confused by your attire and you travelling here alone, but you need to understand that when we see that ring . . ."

"Well, that certainly explains everything. Everyone's been making me nervous."

Nathan grabbed the carafe, refilled his goblet, and offered it to Tarn. "Have a taste. It's a truly exquisite wine, and I hate drinking alone."

The guard held up a hand. "Oh, no thank you. I'm on duty."

"Come on. A taste isn't going to hurt anyone."

Tarn gave in, hesitantly taking the goblet and sipped at the wine. A sudden loud rap at the door caused him to choke in surprise, but he managed to place the goblet on the table without spilling.

"I'll get that for you," he said, rushing to the door.

The short woman appeared and glanced up at the guard, surprised to see him. Tarn ignored her and turned to Nathan. "I bid you a good night, sir. I'll return in the morning when Lord Helmsley is ready to see you."

Nathan, laughing inwardly at his nervous behaviour, waved casually. "Thanks Tarn. Goodnight."

He left in a hurry, leaving the woman standing in the doorway.

"Your bath is ready, sir. If you're ready, please follow me."

Nathan took a large gulp of wine before rising, finding his balance waver. "Lead the way, my good woman."

CHAPTER THREE

Golden morning light streamed through the windows of Nathan's quarters. After the luxurious bath the night before, he had slept soundly. He woke to the sound of distant birdsong, and decided to doze awhile longer on the downy bed. After all the recent travel, it was nice to take it easy.

After a long stretch, he rolled out of bed, only then realizing he was naked and without his clothes. After his bath, he'd come back wearing only a bathrobe. The maid, whose name he managed to pry was Thera, told him she'd have his clothes laundered. He slipped into the bathrobe and opened the door to find a guard standing just outside. The man straightened and looked in his direction.

"Sir?"

Nathan was surprised to know someone had been standing outside his door, likely all night. "Uhm . . . I'm looking for Thera," he stammered. "She took my clothes last night and I need them back."

The guard, slightly put off by Nathan's choice of words, offered an imperceptible smile on his face. "Thera should be here soon enough."

Nathan thanked the guard and quickly closed the door. The morning sun shone brightly, allowing him to experience the majestic mountains in their full glory. Swinging open the window pane, he half expected the same mysterious wind to blow into his room, but nothing happened. He stuck his head out, deeply breathing in the crisp air, and couldn't help but smile at such a beautiful day.

A knock at the door announced Thera's arrival, carrying in his clothes in one hand and a small tray of food in the other.

"Good morning," she said cheerfully. "I trust you had a pleasant night?"

"Indeed. Please, let me take that for you."

She handed him the folded clothes, and rushed to place the tray onto the table.

"Is there anything else you need?"

"No, this is fine, thanks."

"Very well."

She smiled before briskly darting toward the door. Nathan pondered if she was always in a rush. After taking one bite of food, another knock rapped at the door.

"Come in," he called out with a mouthful.

Tarn poked his head in. "Good morning, sir."

"I was hoping it was you. Come in."

Tarn dismissed the guard standing outside the door and entered.

"Take a seat. Have you eaten yet?" Nathan asked.

"Uh . . . Yes, thank you. I wanted to inform you that Lord Helmsley won't be able to see you until late in the day. He apologizes for the continued delay, but has matters he must attend to before seeing you."

"Oh," Nathan said simply.

"I'm very sorry, sir."

Nathan smiled at the guard. "It's not your fault. Don't worry about it."

"You're my charge during your stay. What would you like to do to pass the time?"

"Tarn, I'm sure you have other duties besides playing escort. I'll be fine. I'll just explore the grounds."

"I'm sorry, but I can't have you wandering on your own. Besides, my duty today is to be your escort." The guard stepped closer and whispered in his ear.

“Trust me. This is much more interesting than my regular duties.”

Nathan laughed. “Okay, let me finish up here and you can give me the grand tour.”

* * *

Over the course of the day, Nathan tried his best to ease Tarn away from the mindset of being on duty. Instead, they were just two men, friends even, spending the day together. It was a rare experience for Nathan, and one he enjoyed immensely.

They ventured down every corridor and peeked into nearly every room, all the while Tarn supplying details for their use. They chatted about life in general while enjoying a long lunch. Nathan made a point to steer the conversation away from anything relevant toward his personal life, and kept Tarn talking about his own instead. As the afternoon wore on, they strolled the well-maintained grounds of lush green grass, and gardens smelling of sweet flowers.

“I have to say, this keep is a hidden gem. It’s really out of the way, but I can understand why this location was chosen,” Nathan said, peering up at the mountains.

“Yeah. I rarely get a chance to enjoy the sights. It’s been a pleasure being with you today,” Tarn said with a smile.

“Likewise. One thing I was wondering though. I was under the impression a village was nearby. Where is it?”

Tarn shook his head. “There’s nothing like that around here. Just the keep.”

In the distance, Nathan caught sight of a guard heading their way. “You’ve got a friend coming.”

Tarn trotted over to meet the guard and they spoke briefly. When the guard turned to leave, Tarn beckoned Nathan to join him.

“Lord Helmsley is ready to see you now. Let’s go.”

After a short trek through the maze of corridors, they came upon a large doorway flanked by two guards. One of them opened the door and they entered a cozy reading room. Ornate mahogany shelves lined the walls, crammed with books and tomes of every size and shape. A man, slightly past him prime, sat in a plush velvet chair. He radiated a subtle strength, and his eyes spoke of wisdom.

“My lord, your guest has arrived,” Tarn said, his voice returning to a professional timbre.

Nathan bowed. Lord Helmsley stood to accept his guest, and gestured for him to sit in the chair opposite his.

“Thank you. You may take your leave,” he said to the guard.

Tarn performed a crisp salute and left, closing the door behind him.

“Lord Helmsley, I—”

“Please, call me Patrick. I might be a lord, but even after all these years, I’ve never been comfortable with that title.”

Nathan smiled. “Thank you for your accommodations. Your staff has been very kind, but I’m surprised by the number of guards you keep.”

“Ah well, you can never be too careful.”

“Someone would want to do you harm in these peaceful times? I find that hard to believe.”

“You would be surprised,” Patrick said with a knowing smile.

He pulled the stopper from a crystal carafe, and poured deep red wine into two goblets.

"Drink up," Patrick said, handing him a goblet, and taking a healthy sip from his own.

Nathan joined him, enjoying the aroma and taste of the superb wine. "Shall we get down to business?"

"Business. Yes. Tell me, do you enjoy your line of work?" Patrick asked.

"Enjoy?" Nathan wasn't sure what answer the lord was looking for. "With respect, I don't think *enjoy* would be the right word. I'm skilled at what I do, and the coin is good."

"Coin. I see. Is that what drives you?"

Nathan tried his best to pick the right words. "Unfortunately, coin is what drives this world. Wouldn't you agree?"

While Patrick swirled his drink in thought. "I suppose it does."

Nathan's throat suddenly felt dry and he took a nervous sip.

"So, how many lives have you ended for money?" Patrick blurted out.

Nathan's eyes widened ever so slightly. "I apologize, but is that an appropriate question?"

"Why? Have you lost count?"

Nathan's mouth moved, but no words came out. Patrick, taking another large sip of wine, watched him closely. "I'm waiting for an answer."

Nathan decided to dig into the heart of the matter. "Tell me why you've requested my services if you clearly don't approve of them?"

"I just wanted to know what kind of man you are. I've been searching for you a long time. You're a hard person to find."

Nathan's skin grew cold. "There's no girl, is there?"

Patrick calmly rested his goblet on the table. "No."

Silence filled the room. Nathan glanced back at the door, knowing there were two guards on the other side.

"A hard man to find . . . but I finally did manage to track you down," Patrick continued. "My alchemist is a smart man. He dabbles in magick and offered a way to track your movements. To see where you go and who you meet in your travels."

He gestured at Nathan's hand. "A ring. I just needed a way for you to wear it. And how do you get a man to do what you want?"

Nathan removed the ring and dropped it on the table.

"With the promise of coin, of course," Patrick said.

"The wind," Nathan said to himself.

"Ah yes, he can ride the wind in his mind. The ring acts as an anchor. Brilliant if you ask me."

Patrick picked up his goblet and emptied it, offering Nathan a devious smile. "My alchemist also concocted the poison in the wine we drank."

Nathan stood up, but his legs wobbled. Strength sapped from his body, he fell over, causing the crystal carafe to fall and shatter. Concerned by the commotion, the two guards burst into the room, taking in the scene with hands at the ready to pull their swords free. Patrick stood up and loomed over Nathan.

"The only difference is I drank the antidote first."

The poison worked quickly and Nathan struggled to speak. "Why are you doing this?"

Patrick's face turned scarlet. "You truly have no idea?"

In his muddled state, Nathan tried to piece it together, but failed.

"You murdered my son! And I shall have my vengeance!" His voice shook with rage. "Remove this filth from my sight. Take him to the dungeon! Tomorrow at noontide, we'll have a hanging."

The guards wasted no time, picking Nathan up by his shoulders and dragged him out of the reading room. Head lolling from side to side, he attempted to see where they were taking him, but lifting his head proved too difficult a task.

After a time, Nathan's feet hit stone as they dragged him downstairs. He was aware of the scent of damp earth. His blurry vision alternated between periods of light and dark as they passed crackling torches. Hands groped him, checking for weapons or tools. They found none.

And then everything stopped.

Ringing keys, a heavy lock turning, the screech of metal grinding on metal. He felt an odd weightlessness, only to land roughly on his face. The gate slammed shut and heavy footsteps slowly faded away.

Nathan's last thoughts before losing consciousness were of Samuel's warning.

CHAPTER FOUR

Nathan woke, finding himself in the same position with his face to the ground. Slowly picking himself up, he spied faint torchlight in the passageway. Deep shadows danced on the craggy rock walls. His mouth was dry and he coughed, causing his head to throb violently.

"Thought you were dead," a deep voice spoke from the dark cell opposite his.

Frightened and still disoriented, Nathan instinctively scampered away from the voice until he hit the back wall, smacking his head.

"Sorry, didn't mean to startle you," the voice said, genuinely concerned. "You okay?"

Nathan slumped with his back against the wall, sighing. "I'll live."

"Don't count on that. I reckon if you're down here, your fate's likely sealed."

Memory of the meeting with Lord Helmsley surged to the forefront. He gingerly wiped the dirt off his face, knowing it was likely cut and bruised. "Do you know how long I was out?"

The man chuckled quietly. "Time's meaningless in a place like this."

"Just give me your best guess."

There was a moment of silence while the man thought. "Don't know. A few hours, I reckon."

"I hope you're right. That gives me some time before tomorrow gets here."

"What happens tomorrow?"

"Take a guess," Nathan said darkly.

Bracing himself against the wall, he tested his legs in an attempt to stand. Despite his throbbing head, he was surprised to find his strength had returned. It appeared the poison was far from deadly, and had metabolized quickly in his system.

He stumbled over to the bars of his cell and peered down the passageway leading out. The man came into the light wiping sweat from his bald head. Leaning against the bars of his own cell, he offered Nathan a mysterious stare. He was remarkably tall and imposing, with a belly that spoke of too many nights at the tavern, yet beneath belied the thick muscle of a labourer. But it was the big man's emerald eyes that caught Nathan's attention. They pierced right through him, and his breath caught in his throat while he held his gaze.

"I need to get out of here," Nathan muttered.

The intent look in man's eyes softened, and he laughed nervously. "Yuh. You and me both."

The sound of approaching footsteps silenced him, and both men backed away into the darkness. A silhouetted large frame of an armoured guard stepped into the corridor, peering into their cells.

"Nathan?" the guard whispered.

"Tarn? Is that you?" Nathan asked carefully, taking a step closer.

"Yeah. Everyone is talking about you getting dragged down here. I had to see for myself. What in hells did you do?"

"It's a long story. Listen, you've gotta get me out of here."

Tarn shook his head. "I can't do that. Do you know how much trouble I'd get in?"

"Please. I'm begging you." Nathan walked up to the bars of his cell, hands pleading. "They're going to hang me tomorrow. Just sneak the key from the gaoler and pass it to me. Nobody will know it was you."

"I have the key, but I can't let you out—"

Nathan took his only chance and grabbed the guard by surprise, slamming his head into the bars. He slumped over in a daze, and Nathan wasted no time searching for a key ring. He found it attached to his belt under a fold of his tunic, and pulling with all his might, snapped the metal ring. It was luck that he'd been holding onto the keys, otherwise they would've been strewn everywhere.

He tested each key in turn while the big man stared from his cell, mouth agape at what was occurring. Tarn groaned and began to stir, forcing Nathan to work his nimble hands even faster. The second to last key slid in fully, and turning it produced a solid click. He opened the door in a heartbeat and dragged the semi-conscious guard into his cell.

"I'm sorry, Tarn," Nathan whispered.

He delivered a solid blow to the back of his head, and the guard's body went limp again. He yanked the sword from its scabbard and cut ragged strips from the guard's tunic, binding his hands behind his back and wrapping another strip around his head to gag him.

Nathan exited his cell, closed and locked the gate, and tossed the sword out of reach in case Tarn managed to escape his bonds. Just as he was about to flee down the corridor, the big man caught his attention.

"Wait, hold up!"

Nathan stopped to look at the man.

"What about me? Give me the key," he begged.

Nathan pulled the key from his pocket and tossed it into his cell.

"Don't follow me," Nathan warned.

"It might be best to get out of here together," the man said as he retrieved the key from the cell floor. But when he looked back, Nathan was gone.

* * *

Creeping silently in the shadows, Nathan guessed his way through the labyrinthine passageways and corridors. Torches were placed far and few between, but he could still spot scuffled bootprints on the dusty floor. He figured the path with the most foot traffic was likely the way out.

He came upon a small chamber, lit by two torches on either side. In one corner sat a guard at a table, slouched forward and snoring peacefully. Nathan snuck by him with ease, making his way up the stone spiral staircase.

At the top of the stair, he peeked down the long hallway. All was quiet, and as he stole through the passageways, realized he was familiar with his surroundings. He silently thanked Tarn for his tour of the keep. Nathan considered heading to his quarters to retrieve his rucksack. There was a chance his belongings were already disposed of, but he felt it was a risk worth taking.

Instead of heading up the main staircase, Nathan used a dark and narrow service stairway to the upper floors. The lack of guards surprised him, and it was clear they'd been in place due to his presence. As far as everyone was concerned, he was locked up, and their service was no longer required.

Nathan passed a series of narrow windows, revealing it was indeed night, and he smiled at his luck. The darkness would be his ally during his escape.

Reaching his destination, he padded into his darkened quarters, waiting a moment to allow his eyes to adjust. Faint moonlight spilled into the room, broken by black silhouetted furniture. Feeling his way around, he headed toward his hooded cloak. Fingers found the material hanging from the hook, and he quickly donned it.

Hearing distant voices, Nathan froze. Their tone was relaxed, revealing his escape was still unknown to them. Out of time, he dashed toward his rucksack, managing to stub his toe on it instead. The voices came closer, and with no place to hide, he dove behind the entrance just as the door began to open.

Shielding his eyes from the bright torchlight, he waited for the right moment to sneak up to the guard, and cleanly snapped his neck without hesitation. He crumpled to the ground with a clatter, dropping the torch onto the stone floor.

From his position in the hallway, the second guard didn't see the attack, he only heard its outcome. "What the—are you okay?"

Silence answered, and the ring of steel filled the corridor as the lone guard pulled his sword from its scabbard. Nathan readied himself behind the heavy wooden door, and kicked it closed as the guard entered. Crying out in surprise, the man lost his balance and his blade clattered to the ground. He quickly scrambled back to his feet, but came face to face with his own weapon.

Before the guard could call for help, Nathan swung a deep, ragged slice across his throat. Crimson splashed onto the floor as he fell backward. Head slamming against stone, he gurgled his last breath with bloody bubbles forming around the vicious wound.

Nathan dropped the weapon and grasped the man's legs, dragging him into the room. Peeking his head out the doorway to make sure nobody else was coming, he found all remained silent. But as he stepped into the hallway, he realized a better plan was required. His escape couldn't be as simple as strolling through the main gate. Glancing back into the room, Nathan eyed the guard with the broken neck. The man was taller than him, but not by much. It was a bad idea, but it was the best option he had.

A few minutes later, a guard with ill-fitting gear carried Nathan's belongings down a dark corridor. He cautiously headed toward the courtyard, keeping an eye on his surroundings, but found the area vacant. Upon reaching the exit to the courtyard, he gathered his wits and opened the door to find two pikemen standing guard. One man glanced over to him, but paid no attention.

The disguise worked.

Acting as nonchalant as he could, Nathan closed the door behind him and stepped down into the courtyard, walking the short distance toward the gate.

"A little late for a stroll, isn't it?" the gatekeeper called out.

Nathan quickly closed the gap between them and spoke in a low voice. "I have orders to remove this bag from the keep. It needs to become *lost*, if you get my meaning."

The man offered a questioning glare. "This couldn't wait 'til morning?"

"I have my orders."

"From who?"

Nathan faltered. "Uhm . . . Tarn."

"Tarn? Nobody takes orders from him."

"No, I . . . I mean, he asked me to do it for him."

The guard shook his head slightly, a smirk on his face. "What are you? His dog?"

Nathan held up the rucksack impatiently. "I owed him a favour. Look, are you going to open the gate, or what?"

The guard casually waved a hand and sauntered over to the crank. "Yeah, yeah. Fine. Just help me with it."

Nathan laid the sack against the wall and helped the gatekeeper turn the

large crank. As they finished, the man looked over at the sack. “Why don’t you just burn it to ash if it needs to disappear?”

Nathan knew his time was limited before the guardsman would become suspicious of his flimsy lie. He quickly shouldered the sack and headed through the gate. “The order was to remove it from the keep. I’ll be back soon enough.”

Passing the two pikemen guarding the outside gate, he kept his head down and disappeared into the darkness. The gravel road crunched loudly under his feet, but the heart pounding in his ears was louder still. His eyes slowly adjusted to the moonlight, revealing the black silhouette of pines against the starry sky.

Rounding a bend, Nathan glanced back to find the pikemen were finally out of sight. Adrenaline flowing in his veins, he bolted east into the dense forest. Hunched over, he tried his best to see the way through while pushing away the boughs scratching at his face.

After running in a relatively straight line for a few minutes, he stooped over, trying to catch his breath. Glancing up, he found the pines grew larger the deeper he went, making it easier to manoeuvre around the trunks.

Suddenly, yelling in the distance came from the keep’s location. His luck had truly held out, managing to escape just in time. But not wanting to test his luck any further, he ran deeper into the forest. The trees drew stark shadows on the bed of dead pine needles and every direction looked the same. His lungs burned, and he’d lost track how long he’d been running. And while he tried his best to use the moon as a guide, he knew he was already lost.

He stopped to listen for trouble. Instead he heard a light trickling of water further south in the forest. He followed it, coming upon a large ravine. Carefully descending the steep valley, he dodged the few tree trunks in his way.

He dipped his hands into the stream and splashed the frigid mountain water onto his face. The small cuts stung at first, but the cold soon numbed the pain. He cupped more water in his hands and drank, satiating his thirst.

The early signs of morning crept into the forest, and Nathan decided it was a safe place to rest for a few hours. He stepped away from the water and toward a particularly large tree. Amid the gnarled roots, he found a spot to lie down, using the trunk to hide himself as much as possible.

He removed his helmet and the sword hanging from his belt, and dug through the rucksack to find his weapon of choice, his dagger. If attacked, he’d be ready. Using the sack as a lumpy pillow, he lay down and closed his eyes, and the gentle sound of water lulled him to sleep.

CHAPTER FIVE

Nathan woke to the sight of sunlight streaming through the boughs of tall evergreens. His body ached, and he sat up to rub his backside. A startled doe drinking from the stream with her fawn raised her head. He held still, allowing them to resume with caution.

The peace was short-lived. The loud report of a snapping branch spooked them, and they bolted off. Heavy steps continued along the slope of the ravine, trudging through the undergrowth. Dagger in hand, Nathan crouched near the base of the tree in wait to see who, or what, it was.

Carefully peeking around, he caught sight of a large man carrying a sword, bloody with gore. Upon reaching the stream, he tossed the sword aside, dropped to his knees and dunked his bald head into the water. Nathan recognized him from the dungeon cell, and he pondered how many men lost their lives trying to bar the big man's way.

Holding still, Nathan continued to spy the man scrubbing his face with his hands. But then he suddenly stopped, as though feeling Nathan's gaze upon him, and turned to his direction. The man scrambled to his feet, grasped the sword, and marched toward Nathan with deadly intent.

"You're real persistent," he said through clenched teeth, wiping water from his eyes with a free hand.

Nathan nearly fell backward at the sudden aggression, but realized all the man saw was the guard's armour he was wearing. He dropped the dagger and raised his hands to his side.

"No, it's me! The guy from the cell."

The man faltered, lowering his sword slightly and peered closer at Nathan's face. "Gods, I didn't recognize you."

Nathan bent over to retrieve his dropped dagger, and proceeded to unbuckle the straps holding the armour in place. "This gear has served its purpose. I think wearing it now will only bring me trouble."

"I can't believe I found you," the man said, stepping toward him. "I wanna thank you."

"For what?"

"Saving my life."

Nathan stopped a moment and glanced at him. "What are you talking about?"

"If you hadn't been in that cell, got the key from that guard, I'd still be down there."

Nathan continued to strip himself of the armour. "I'd hardly call that saving someone's life."

"They were gonna hang me."

Nathan laughed under his breath. "It would seem our dear Lord Helmsley enjoys hangings."

He shed the last of the armour and padded underclothing, down to his loincloth. The big man averted his gaze, cheeks reddening, lamely looking everywhere except Nathan's direction. Rooting through his rucksack, Nathan found his own clothes. Quietly lamenting that he was unable to bring his boots during the escape, he donned the guard's leather boots instead. Once Nathan was fully dressed, the man closed the space between them and offered a meaty hand in greeting.

"The name's Brohm," he said with a crooked little smile.

Nathan tried to ignore the fact that he found the smile disarming, and quickly shook his hand. "If you plan on keeping a sword, you might as well

take this. I certainly can't use it," he said, offering the guard's scabbard and belt.

Brohm accepted it, and pulled the sword free. From the corner of his eye, Nathan watched him test its weight, and swing it with obvious skill.

"No good with a sword, yuh? You the sneaky type?"

Nathan ignored the question and shouldered his pack. He gathered the rest of the armour and his waterskin, and stepped to the stream's edge. After filling the skin, he dropped the armour into the water. It sunk to the bottom amid the rocks and branches, and he was confident that unless someone was standing right there, it would go unnoticed.

"Safe travels, Brohm."

The big man, cinching the belt around his wide waist, glanced up bewildered by Nathan's short goodbye, and ran up beside him.

"So, where you headed?" Brohm asked nonchalantly.

"Away from here. You should probably do the same."

"Uhm, what I meant to say was: where are *we* headed?"

Nathan stopped in his tracks. "Look, you seem like an okay guy, but I travel alone. Sorry."

"Well, right now there's only one way to go," Brohm said, gesturing west. "I reckon south leads to cliffs. Everywhere else is mountainside. The only way out from here is to travel the road."

Nathan looked about. He didn't know the area very well, but it seemed Brohm did.

"Could we just stick together until we reach an inn or town or something?" Brohm asked. "If we run into trouble, two is better than one."

Nathan knew he was right, and it seemed the man could hold his own in a fight. "Alright. We'll travel together until we reach a settlement of some kind, and then we'll part ways."

Brohm nodded with a smile on his face, and they continued to walk west alongside the stream.

They travelled in silence for most of the morning. On occasion, Nathan cast sidelong glances at his new companion. He couldn't deny his physical attraction to the man, yet tried his best to keep his thoughts and feelings in check. It would be best once they parted ways.

They came upon a clearing in the ravine, allowing the warm sun to beat down on them. Brohm stretched his arms above his head and breathed in deeply.

"Ah, it's good to feel the sun and smell this clean air," he said. "That cell was awful."

"How long were you in there?"

"Not that long, really. But I reckon even a day in there is too long for anyone," he said, chuckling.

Despite his best wishes, Nathan continued to surreptitiously watch the big man. He found his demeanour interesting. At a glance, Brohm was a simple guy, yet underneath, he saw a sentinel searching the area for trouble. It seemed so casual, like an automatic response he wasn't aware of, and it impressed Nathan.

As though to prove a point, Brohm glanced over and gave him the same crooked smile. "You don't talk much, but you sure enjoy watching, yuh?"

Nathan felt his face flush. "I apologize."

"It's no problem, though it looks like you want to ask me something."

"Well, uhm . . ." Nathan felt like the man was reading his mind.

"What's wrong?"

Nathan sighed. “For reasons I’m not going to get into right now, I find it best to keep to myself.”

“You’re a secretive person. I get that.”

“It’s because of what I do. The less someone knows about me, the better.”

Brohm laughed. “Okay, you can’t say that, and *not* expect me to ask what you do.”

“I’m serious,” Nathan said. “I lost someone who knew too much, who . . . got too close.”

“Oh, sorry. I didn’t mean to—”

“It’s okay,” Nathan said. “It was a long time ago.”

They returned to silence as they continued their trek through the ravine.

An hour later, Nathan glimpsed a high bridge above the ravine, and they clambered up the south side one hundred metres from the road.

“Stay low. I’m going to check it out,” Nathan said once they reached the top.

He sprinted the distance through the shorter pines and scrubby brush, slowing as he approached the road. All was silent except for the odd bird call, and wind whistling through the trees. Examining the path, it was clear from the fresh hoofprints that a number of patrols had passed recently.

When Nathan returned to Brohm’s location, he found him nearby urinating on a tree. The big man bashfully turned his body away, and Nathan politely stepped farther out, waiting for him to finish.

“So, what’d you find?” Brohm asked, walking toward Nathan.

“There’s no question they’re looking for us.”

Brohm offered him a worried look.

Nathan continued with his plan. “It’d be safer to travel in the bush, but since the trees are all bunched up, it would be slow-going. I think we can walk the road and hide if we hear someone coming.”

Brohm nodded in agreement, and they headed back to the road. Confident it was clear, they stepped out of the trees and started walking south at a quick pace. The hot sun beat down on them directly overhead, throwing short shadows at their feet, and soon Brohm was dripping with sweat.

“It doesn’t look like you’re used to this sort of thing.”

“I’ll be fine,” Brohm said.

“Just try to keep up,” Nathan said with the faintest hint of the smile.

“Don’t hold back on my account.”

Nathan quickened his pace, glancing at Brohm with a grin.

“Oh, come on!” the big man said, laughing.

Nathan untied the waterskin from his belt and handed it to Brohm. “Here. Drink some water before you faint.”

“Thanks,” he said, taking the skin and drinking a swig. Cupping water into his hand, he splashed it onto his face. After handing it back, Nathan took a drink and retied it to his belt.

“So what’s your plan?” Brohm asked.

“I haven’t a clue. For now, I need to meet some folks in Remich and Summerton. What about you?”

Brohm shrugged. “I reckon lay low for a while.”

“Do you know this area well?”

“Sort of. Why?”

“I’m wondering if there’s an inn between here and Remich.”

“Nah. The road is long and there’s nowhere to stop for the night. I reckon we’ll be sleeping under the stars tonight.”

“I find it strange that the keep is in such a remote place,” Nathan said.

"When you've got lots of coin, paying extra for supplies to be carted in isn't a problem."

"It must be nice not to worry about such things."

By the late afternoon, the road and surroundings gradually changed to a rocky terrain. Evergreens grew sparsely, and Nathan knew if a patrol came by, there would be nowhere to hide. The road beyond switchbacked down the southern slope, overlooking a sea of evergreens below.

Nathan glanced over to Brohm, a twang of guilt in his chest. It was clear the big man didn't want to travel alone, and was pushing himself to keep up to Nathan's pace, sweating and breathing heavy.

"Once we reach the bottom and back into the trees, we'll stop and find shelter for the night," Nathan said. "You okay?"

Brohm gave him a weak nod. "Don't worry about me. Let's go."

They quickened their pace down the steep road, careful to keep steady footing on the loose rock, and managed to arrive at the mouth of the vast evergreen forest unseen. They hiked east into the cover of trees. A gentle, fragrant breeze cooled their faces, and Brohm sighed audibly from the reprieve of the sun. Fifty metres from the road, they came upon a shallow downward slope.

"This should be fine. We're clear of anyone seeing us."

"Good," Brohm said, slumping down against a tree.

"You rest. I'll see if I can find anything to eat."

Brohm rubbed his belly. "Yuh? I can help. I'm starving."

"Stay put. You're exhausted."

Brohm didn't offer any resistance, and nodded his thanks.

Nathan decided to head north-east, soon coming to the face of rocky cliffs from where they'd come. Along the ragged edge, bushes with small red berries grew in abundance, and he stepped closer to investigate. Picking one and hesitantly chewing it, he winced at the bitterness, but knew they weren't poisonous. He plucked a few more and popped them into his mouth, continuing east along the ragged mountain wall.

His ears perked up, hearing the trickle of water. Peering through the bushes, he found a hidden cave, and pushing a shrub aside, tentatively stepped into the darkness. The sound of water was clearer now, and the walls and floor of the cave were glistening wet. He cupped his hand against the dripping stone wall to taste the water. Satisfied it was clean, he filled his waterskin until it brimmed over.

Straining to see further into the darkness, he carefully felt his way deeper until he found the floor ascended slightly. It was dry and relatively clean. There was no way to know how far it went, but it seemed an excellent place to sleep for the night.

He stepped back into the afternoon light, and headed to where he'd left Brohm. All the trees looked similar, and without any landmarks to fall back on, he walked slowly and scanned the area. Finally, Brohm's legs came into view on the ground, still sitting against the tree. Nathan stepped up to him, pointing in the direction he'd come.

"I found a—"

Brohm instinctively jumped up in a flash, laying a hand on the hilt of his sword, but upon seeing Nathan's face, relaxed his stance. Nathan couldn't fathom how the big man moved so quickly, and was again impressed.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to come at you from behind."

Brohm waved a dismissive hand. "Man, I must be tired. I was falling asleep and you caught me off-guard."

Nathan handed him the waterskin. “I found a cave we can sleep in. It’s safe and out of sight.”

Brohm’s brow wrinkled. “A cave?”

“Don’t worry, it’s empty. No bats or anything.”

“That’s not my worry,” Brohm said quietly to himself.

Nathan was already heading back, calling back to Brohm. “Come on, it’s not far. This way.”

The big man trailed behind, dragging his feet, but eventually caught up to Nathan who was picking up wood and branches from the ground.

“I found a huge patch of jorniberries too.”

“Hmm, never heard of them. Are they good?” Brohm asked, helping Nathan pick up wood.

“They’re awful, but they’re better than nothing.”

They arrived at the mouth of the cave, and Nathan shouldered his way through the shrubbery with Brohm reluctantly in tow.

“Careful. The water makes it slippery,” Nathan warned.

“I’m not sleeping in a wet cave,” Brohm whined, standing at the entrance.

“It’s dry up here. Just step carefully and you’ll be fine.”

Brohm stood still, seemingly stuck in place.

“What’s wrong?” Nathan asked. “Are you afraid of the dark?”

“No, it’s just that . . . I just don’t like the idea of all that rock above my head. What if it comes crashing down on us?”

“This cave has been here much longer than either of us. It’s not going anywhere.”

“Maybe. But I . . .”

Nathan stepped back to Brohm and laid a hand on his shoulder, leading him into the cave. It was then he realized the height difference between them. Brohm was easily a head taller, and his added bulk compounded his imposing nature. Nathan smiled inwardly at the idea that a man of his stature could be afraid of anything.

“You see? It’s not so dark once you get in here,” Nathan said.

“I told you, I’m not afraid of the dark. I just don’t like small spaces.” Suddenly, the big man tripped on a small outcropping of rock, nearly falling over.

“Forget this!” He dropped the wood and stormed out of the cave, almost slipping on the wet ground again. Nathan sighed, gathered the mess of wood into a pile, and exited the cave to find Brohm with his back turned, leaning against a tree.

“Sorry,” Nathan said.

“Don’t be,” Brohm grumbled under his breath. “It’s my problem, not yours.”

Nathan wanted to console him, but didn’t know how, so he left him to his thoughts.

* * *

After laying a campfire in the cave, Nathan stepped outside to find Brohm inspecting the jorniberries.

“Are you sure these are okay to eat?”

“Yeah. Like I said, they taste awful, but they won’t kill you.”

Brohm fumbled to pick one of the small berries with his meaty fingers, but squeezed too hard causing it burst into a juicy mess. After successfully picking another berry, his face scrunched up at the taste.

“I guess it’s an acquired taste,” he said, laughing.

Nathan was glad Brohm seemed back to his usual self. They picked and ate berries into the evening, and before long, the light of the sun was lost in the forest.

“So, I take it you won’t be joining me in the cave?” Nathan asked.

“No. I’ll sleep out here,” Brohm said resolutely.

“Aren’t you going to be cold?”

“Nah, I’ve been told I give off heat like a blacksmith’s forge. I can’t remember the last time I was cold. I’ll be fine.”

Nathan shrugged his shoulders. “Okay. I’ll see you in the morning then.”

“G’night. Enjoy your cave,” Brohm said with a smirk.

Nathan waved, making his way into the darkness. In short time, a small fire was burning and warming the area. Wrapped in his cloak, he lay back, thinking about Brohm.

Nathan enjoyed his easy-going nature, and felt a strange pull to him. Despite his statement that morning, the idea of parting ways with Brohm seemed foreign now. All the while, his mind screamed to fight back the growing affection he had for the big man. The rule he’d made for himself was paramount, but he was tired of fighting it.

Regardless, reason still had a firm grip, and he found himself conflicted between what he wanted, and what was ultimately best for both of them. Yet the factors that culminated to that horrible event from his past didn’t seem to apply now.

Brohm was different, and that changed everything.

CHAPTER SIX

Nathan woke to memories of half-remembered dreams, finding himself shaking from the chill of the damp cave. He'd quickly run out of wood during the night, and the fire was long dead. Morning light streamed into the dark alcove. Shouldering his rucksack, he stepped outside and stretched his back. He scanned the area for Brohm, but the big man was nowhere in sight.

"Brohm?"

Only the distant birds echoing among the pines answered his call.

Nathan stepped deeper into the forest, examining the ground for telltale tracks, but the trampled area from the day before made it impossible.

"Brohm!" he yelled out this time.

As before, there was no reply. Nathan wasn't sure what to do. Should he continue on alone? Was Brohm hurt, or did he decide to make his own way?

After making the decision to stay with Brohm, he was disappointed that he might've lost his chance. But he wasn't about to give up so easily. Aimlessly wandering amid the trees, he scanned for footprints or signs of a struggle, finding neither.

Hearing faint footsteps, he stopped and listened carefully. The sound of crunching rock underfoot came from the forest's edge along the mountain cliff. He couldn't see the source, so he snuck his way closer. Two armoured men came into view forty metres away, walking near the hidden cave. They wore black tabards with a red coat of arms. Nathan couldn't believe they were searching so far from the road, and was angry to know how close they were to finding him.

They spoke in low voices. One man pointed at the jorniberry bushes, and then at the ground, supposedly at the tracks left by Brohm and himself. The other man gazed about the area and Nathan quickly ducked behind a tree. He held still for a moment before peeking out again, and watched the two men head back toward the road.

Without warning, a hand touched his shoulder. Pulling his dagger, he spun around to see Brohm, who took a reflexive step back.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to scare you," Brohm said.

Nathan regained his composure, sheathing his dagger. "Where were you? I thought you'd left without me."

"I saw those men coming and hid. I can't believe they didn't hear you calling my name."

Nathan felt very stupid by his actions, and for coming to silly conclusions of Brohm's disappearance.

"What are the chances that they'd come out this way," Brohm continued. "We're gonna have to be careful if we travel the road."

"I think it would be best if we stayed to the trees today. They're spaced wide enough apart that they won't slow us down much."

Brohm nodded. "Let's go then. Do you think we'll make it to Remich before nightfall?"

"I certainly hope so."

They hiked south, keeping fifty metres distance parallel to the road. The shade helped Brohm stay cool, allowing them to hold a steady pace.

"So, how'd you sleep?" Nathan asked.

"I reckon much better than trying to sleep in a cave, thanks very much."

Nathan smiled. "Hopefully we'll be able to sleep in a bed tonight. Remich has an inn that'll give us safe haven in case trouble arrives."

"The Black Lamb."

"You know it?"

"Yuh, I get work through there. Griff's a good guy."

Nathan shook his head in disbelief. "It seems we run in similar circles. I'm surprised we haven't met sooner."

"Do you go there often?"

"Not really. I travel a lot."

Brohm nodded. "It's one of the few places I go when I need some coin."

"If you don't mind me asking, what do people hire you for?"

"What do you think?" Brohm flexed an arm, his shirt sleeve straining against bulging muscle. Nathan couldn't help but stare.

"Some hire me as a bodyguard. Others for intimidation. It's easy work," Brohm continued with a grin.

Nathan laughed. "Yeah, I guess that's appropriate work for you."

"What about you?"

"Me? I, uh . . ."

He had no idea what Brohm's reaction would be, but glancing over to the big man's peculiarly disarming grin, found himself willing to spill his secret.

"I have a knack of getting rid of people, for good."

Brohm didn't miss a beat. "So, like an assassin for hire?"

"Yeah . . ."

"Interesting. I've never met someone like you before. Are you good at what you do?"

"I'd like to think so. I tend to use poisons rather than physical means. If it's done right, poison can go undetected, and folk will assume they died from natural causes."

"Sneaky. I like it."

And just like that, Nathan exposed himself to someone he barely knew, and his reaction was nothing he could've expected. He mused if they were fated to meet. The idea of having a friend to confide in, and accept him for what he did, brought a smile to his face.

"Get down!"

The big man tackled him to the ground, falling alongside and holding him down with an arm across his back. Trying to catch his breath, Nathan followed Brohm's finger pointing toward the road. A patrol of six armoured horsemen rode into view, heading north toward Helmsley Keep.

The two watched in silence, keeping low and still. The horsemen, despite scanning the area with great care, passed without stopping. Regardless, Brohm held him down until they were out of view over a small ridge. Letting out a sigh of relief, he stood up and offered his hand to Nathan. He took it, and with no effort, the big man pulled him to his feet.

"Sorry for bringing you down so hard," he said with a sheepish grin.

"I deserved it. It's good someone was paying attention."

Brohm's grin widened. "I just happened to see movement in the corner of my eye."

That said, they brushed themselves off and continued south with wary eyes toward the road.

* * *

The day passed without incident, and in relative silence. Night fell by the time they reached the grassy foothills outside Remich. The moon sat large just above the distant hills, lighting their way and casting long shadows behind them. Nathan donned his cloak with the hood pulled up to stave off the chilly

air.

For most of the day, he remained deep in thought, reminiscing about his past, the choices he'd made, and the outcome that resulted from those choices. He dreamt of a future without regret. One where he could live his life without fear of retaliation. He realized more than ever he wanted a clean slate to try again, yet with all his knowledge intact.

Brohm seemed content in walking without a need to fill the quiet with idle banter. Nathan appreciated that, noting his respect for the man grew every passing day.

Upon reaching the walled town, they stopped at a massive wooden door flanked by two large torches. Shielding their eyes from the glare, they looked up at the guard standing in a parapet above the doorway.

"What's your business?" His voice was gruff and tired.

"Hullo, good sir." Brohm called out, taking the initiative. "Me and my fellow here are just looking for an inn to rest our weary feet."

The guard examined them again closely, as if attempting to read their intentions. "Very well, but I don't want any trouble."

The gatekeeper called back to someone within the walled structure, and after a moment, the door creaked opened to reveal two more guardsmen. Nathan kept his hood up, walking silently, while Brohm nodded to the men as they passed. Their grim faces offered no such pleasantries in return. Stepping into the town proper, Brohm gave his belly a quick rub.

"It'll be nice to get some food in here. I don't reckon I recall the last time I ate a proper meal," he said, concern crossing his face.

Nathan grinned. "I'm hungry too. Come on, let's get to the inn."

They hurried along the main street, passing by flocks of people, mostly drunk. Their boisterous laughter echoed off the buildings, travelling farther in the night air. Within another throng, Nathan caught sight two men of the town watch, one holding a lantern to banish the shadows. Without raising suspicion, he nudged Brohm, gesturing for him to follow into a dark alleyway. They stepped back a fair way, holding their backs flat to the wall, and allowed the patrol to pass.

"Why are we hiding?" Brohm whispered.

"We don't know if anyone here's been notified of our escape. It's best to keep out of sight from the guards."

"But what about those gatekeepers?"

"As odd as it sound, they're often not told anything. They just keep a semblance of order."

He peeked out to make sure the patrol was out of sight, and they continued their way to the inn. Once the building came into view, they could hear the usual din from within. Nathan pulled back his hood and opened the door, blasted by the noise multiplied ten-fold. It was a mixture of laughter, yelling, and lively music. With much help from Brohm, they shouldered their way through the crowd, finally making it to the bar.

A barmaid came up to them, yelling in their ear. "Whadda ya'll have?"

"Is the kitchen still open?" Nathan asked.

"Sorry, hon. It closed hours ago. Anything left will be bone cold."

"We'll take whatever you've got."

She eyed them suspiciously. "You sure?"

"That, and the biggest tankard you've got," Brohm added, nodding vigorously with wide eyes.

The barmaid shrugged. "Okay, gimme a moment."

Nathan glanced down the bar and saw Griff, the owner. He waved to get the

thin man's attention, but he was clearly busy with other patrons. A few minutes later, the barmaid returned with two plates of food.

"Beef stew, and I found a loaf of bread," she said.

"Thanks," Nathan said.

"I'll get your ales."

Brohm took the loaf and ripped it in two, handing half to Nathan, and then tucked into his food. Nathan followed suit, and despite being cold, it was delicious. The barmaid returned with two brimming tankards. Both men, their mouths full, nodded their thanks. Picking up their ales in unison, Brohm took the opportunity to clank their tankards, accidentally splashing ale onto Nathan's meal.

"Oops," Brohm said with a toothy grin. "Eh, it'll be fine."

"Oh, really?" Nathan offered his own mischievous smile and splashed ale onto Brohm's plate.

"Come on! Was that really necessary?" Brohm playfully knocked Nathan's shoulder, forgetting his own strength and nearly pushed him off his seat. Both men laughed raucously.

"Well, look what we have here."

They looked over to find Griff swagger toward them.

"You two've got balls coming here, you know that?" he said with a sly grin.

Nathan and Brohm exchanged worried glances, and Griff leaned onto the bar to speak closely to them.

"You do know you're wanted men, right?"

"I assumed, but wasn't entirely sure how far the news had spread," Nathan muttered, spying over his shoulder at the boisterous crowd.

"And you're wanted by Lord Helmsley, of all people," Griff continued. "Gods! I'd expect something like that from ol' Brohm here. But you, Nathan? I thought you were better than that."

Nathan shrugged. "Had I known my actions would've upset him so much, I would've—"

"Upset him? It's said the man is livid with rage, and has an entire king's army looking for you two."

"The army?" Brohm said, glancing nervously at Nathan.

"He's exaggerating."

"I'm not exaggerating," Griff said. "There's a lot of men out there looking for you two."

"We're not planning on sticking around," Nathan said. "Just stopping for the night. I hope you have some rooms left."

"Eh, just one left. Sorry boys. You'll have to flip a coin."

Nathan shook his head. "Brohm, you take the bed. I'll sleep on the floor."

"No no no, I'm fine on the floor. I have extra cushioning," the big man said with a laugh, thumbing at his behind.

"Just take the bed," Nathan said firmly.

Griff laughed. "Gods, you two are like an old married couple."

Their heads spun quickly to stare at each other incredulously.

* * *

After Nathan paid for their room and board, they swam through the throng of patrons and headed up to the second floor. The room was small, but adequate for their needs. Nathan lit an oil lamp, turning it down to just a flicker while Brohm untied and kicked off his boots. The big man flopped onto the bed and its wooden frame groaned from the unexpected weight.

The sudden shift from the noise of downstairs to the relative quiet of their room had a calming effect, and Nathan suddenly felt very tired. Using his rucksack as a pillow, he lay down on the rough-hewn wooden floor.

"What are we going to do?" Brohm asked, a hint of hopelessness in his voice.

Nathan admittedly felt overwhelmed by the past few days, knowing their plight was far from over. He weighed their options but came back empty-handed.

"I don't know," he said finally. "We'll have to stay low somewhere. Do you know a place we could hide?"

There was no reply. He rose up to find Brohm fast asleep. His massive chest rose and fell, his breathing slow and steady. Clearly, the big man was exhausted. Laying back down again, Nathan closed his eyes and tried to calm his racing mind. Concentrating on the smooth rhythm of Brohm's breathing, he soon found the sleep he so desperately wanted.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Nathan woke to a hand shaking his shoulder. After rubbing his eyes, Griff's concerned face came into focus.

"I think it's time you found your way out of Remich, friend," he whispered.

"What's going on?"

"Word is there's a detachment of the royal guard coming to town this morning. They report of two dangerous men who escaped the dungeon at Helmsley Keep."

Nathan turned to peek out the window. The sun was still well below the horizon. "Can we hide out here?"

Griff shook his head. "I really think it'd be best if you two made yourselves scarce."

Nathan sighed. "Okay. We'll need provisions and horses. Could you help us with that?"

He nodded and turned to depart.

"Griff." Nathan stopped him. "Thanks for watching out for us."

"Somebody's gotta do it," he said with a grin and left the room.

Brohm, snoring loudly, remained fast asleep. Leaning over, Nathan grabbed his shoulder to wake him. The big man woke with a snort and snagged his hand, twisting it with overwhelming power.

Nathan yelled out in pain. "What's the big idea?"

Brohm immediately let go and offered a tired sigh. "Sorry. Old habits die hard."

While Nathan shook feeling back into his hand, Brohm yawned and peered out the window. "It's still dark out. Why'd you wake me?"

Nathan explained the situation that they needed to leave immediately.

"Maybe we could hide out at my Pa's farm," Brohm said, pondering.

"Where is it?"

"Not far. Near the mountain range between Summerton and Oxollo."

They headed downstairs to the common room, finding a few men asleep, sprawled over tables and on the floor. A barmaid carrying a tray moved about the room, collecting glasses and tankards. Griff came in from the front entrance.

"The stablehand is securing two horses for you now. I've gathered some dry goods I had in store. It's not much, but better than nothing." He handed Nathan a package wrapped in cloth. "You'll find bread and dried meat. It'll keep you going for a day or two."

Nathan stored the package in his rucksack, and clasped arms with Griff. "Thank you for everything. How much for the horses and food?"

Griff waved a hand dismissively. "Don't worry about it."

Nathan smiled. "You're a good friend."

"You owe me. Safe journey to both of you."

Brohm shook the barkeeper's hand, and they turned to leave.

"I almost forgot," Nathan said. "I was hoping to see Danny before I left, but there's no time. When you see him next, be sure to let him know I said 'thanks for everything', okay?" Nathan flipped a coin to the barkeeper. "And to have a round on me."

Griff's face blanched.

"What?" Nathan asked.

"It's Danny. He's . . . not with us anymore."

Nathan blinked.

"There was a fire three days ago," Griff continued. "They found his body,

what was left of it, in his home. Nobody knows how it started."

Nathan's skin flushed ice cold. His mind flashed with the memory of men leaving Helmsley Keep the night he arrived. He knew in his heart, he was the reason Danny was dead. Speechless, he left the inn in a daze, leaving Brohm to catch up behind him. The big man watched him, clearly wanting to comfort him, but wasn't sure how. Upon reaching the stables, he gestured to Nathan to stay put.

"I'll take care of this," he said quietly.

Nathan stood there, blank-faced, while Brohm spoke with the stablehand. He returned with two horses, and handed one set of reins to Nathan, who took them without pause. While Brohm led them down the quiet main street, Nathan glanced up at the pre-dawn sky, stars still twinkling. They usually offered him solace, but now, he felt nothing. Finally arriving at the gate, Brohm painted a smile and waved at the two guardsmen.

"G'morning," he said.

"Morning?" one of the men grunted. "It's hardly light enough to call this morning."

"Yuh, I suppose. We've a long road ahead of us. Wanted to get an early start," Brohm said.

"Clearly. No other reason to be up at this ungodly hour."

The two gatekeepers didn't seem to care who they were, and opened the gate without delay. Riding through, they made their way to the road, and headed east toward the brightening horizon.

* * *

They rode hard toward Summerton with Brohm leading the first few hours. But as Nathan recovered from the shock of Griff's news, he spurred his horse past Brohm, forcing him to follow. Stomach in knots, he couldn't help but be worried about Samuel. He could hear the man's hefty laugh, and imagined him saying that nothing was wrong. He hoped he was worrying for nothing.

It wasn't until the sun was nearly overhead that Nathan finally spoke. "It was my fault."

Brohm knew he'd said something, but couldn't hear with the wind rushing in his ears. "What?"

Nathan slowed his horse, allowing Brohm to ride up beside him. "It's my fault Danny's dead."

"How? Weren't you with me when the fire broke out?"

Nathan sighed. "It's a long story. But it involves Lord Helmsley and his magick-dabbling alchemist."

Brohm's ears seemed to perk up. "Magick? Really?"

Nathan nodded, staring at the road ahead.

"Why did Helmsley have him killed?"

"I don't know for sure. But I led him to Danny without even knowing it."

"How can it be your fault if you didn't know?" Brohm asked.

"It doesn't matter whether I knew or not. He's dead because of my actions," Nathan said, his voice on edge.

"Let's keep moving, yuh?" Brohm suggested.

Nathan answered by urging his horse to a gallop.

By mid-afternoon, he recognized the few landmarks that announced Summerton was near, and the long grass covering the countryside soon gave way to farmland. Mostly corn, but also potato, carrot and turnip. The thought of food made his stomach rumble, and he realized they'd never stopped to eat.

His singular goal had been to reach Summerton as quickly as possible. He glanced back at Brohm. He looked tired, yet seemed determined to follow without complaint, and Nathan silently thanked his friend for being so understanding.

The small village soon became visible on the horizon of gentle hills, yet Nathan felt something was amiss. He couldn't see the Willow Inn, which towered the small buildings of the settlement. Once they arrived in the village proper, the villagefolk going about their business stopped to stare as they passed. The inn finally came into view, and Nathan looked on in despair. The charred remains of the building had fallen in on itself. The massive willow tree—its namesake—was a blackened skeleton, its thin branches burnt away, leaving a dead husk standing over the collapsed building.

Nathan leaped off his horse and ran to the collapsed building. Three men stood nearby, inspecting the damage. A grey-haired man caught sight of Nathan, and held out his arms to stop him.

"Whoa, whoa! Slow down, son. It's dangerous in there."

Not meaning to put up a struggle, Nathan took a few steps back and surveyed the area.

"What happened?" he asked, out of breath.

"A tragedy," the man said, shaking his head. "A fire hotter than I've ever seen. No amount of water quenched its thirst."

"But how did it happen?" Nathan demanded.

He shook his head again and shrugged. "It was the middle of the night. Nobody knows how it started."

"What about Samuel? Did he make it out alright? He was a friend of mine."

"He was a friend to us all," he said, avoiding his gaze. "I'm sorry, son. A number of poor souls lost their lives that night, including Samuel."

Nathan, mouth agape, stepped away from the man, and Samuel's warning flashed into his mind again. Had Nathan listened to that intuition, everything could've been different. Brohm, the only person left Nathan cared for, stood in the distance, holding the reins of their two mounts. Nathan closed the space between them with determination.

"We're parting ways," he said.

Brohm gave a look of bewilderment. "But—"

"There's no discussion. Give me the reins."

Brohm reluctantly handed them over and Nathan mounted up.

"Don't follow me," he said, overcome with a sense of déjà vu from their first meeting. Ignoring the pained look of dismay on Brohm's face, he forcefully dug his heels into the horse's flanks, and fled back west through the village to the rolling hills of the countryside.

He had no idea where to go, but it didn't matter. He just needed get away from Brohm. As much as he tried to fight it, tears streamed down his face, and he screamed out with every ounce of strength he had, cursing the sky.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Arriving at the crossroads, Nathan dismounted, unsure which direction to take. The short ride had calmed him, yet the seed of anger and despair still burned within. He took a long draught from his waterskin while gazing out at the four directions, including the road back to Summerton. They offered no solution.

His thoughts returned to Brohm. His plan to lay low at his father's farm was solid, but Nathan questioned if he was taking advantage of him. Drawing a long sigh, he purged the big man from his mind.

Nathan ignoring the roads, and eyed a grove nestled within the long grass plains. It looked inviting, and he decided to lead his horse in that direction. It was a small wood, but would easily hide him for the night. After tying his horse by a creek, he rested against a tree trunk. The appetite he had earlier was gone. Instead, he felt drowsy, and the shade of the trees in the warm afternoon sun invited him to sleep. Drinking again, he closed his eyes, listening to the wind gently rustle through the leaves.

* * *

Nathan woke with a start.

The warm afternoon was gone. He found himself in a dank stone dungeon, lit only by a torch flickering nearby in a sconce. His naked body shivered in the cold. Manacles around his wrists, holding his arms in the air, bit into his flesh, and tight shackles pinched around his ankles. Gripping the chain and testing the strength of the rivets in the stone ceiling proved fruitless.

Nathan had no memory of how he got here.

A groan to his left told him he wasn't alone. In the dim light, the silhouette of a large naked body hung in similar restrains. It looked like Brohm, but he couldn't be sure.

"Hey," Nathan whispered. "Hey! Wake up."

The man roused from his stupor, and seemed just as confused by his predicament. "Wha? Nathan, is that you?"

"Brohm! What in hells is going on?"

"I . . . I dunno. I don't remember how I got here."

"Can you pull yourself free?"

Brohm took hold of the chain, yanking hard, but only found resistance. The sound of keys on a ring jingling stopped him, and more torchlight appeared beyond the barred doorway, down a corridor.

"Have my guests finally woken up?" a voice called out.

Neither Nathan nor Brohm said a word. An older man appeared in the doorway, his round belly protruding from a greasy leather apron. He fitted a key into the lock and opened the gated door.

"I've not much time, so we'll have to perform the abridged version of this," the man said, placing his torch into another sconce on the opposite side.

Near Brohm was a table lined with various knives and tools of torture. As soon as the big man saw them, he shuddered in fear. "Whoa, wait. What's this about?"

The torturer picked a terrifying hooked blade from the array, and stepped toward Brohm with a wide grin. "Your friend over there is going to tell me what I need to know, otherwise I'll gut ya," he said, poking at Brohm's belly for emphasis.

"I'll tell you anything," Nathan blurted. "Just don't hurt him!"

"You'd give up everything just to save him?" the old man asked in astonishment.

"Yes!" he said without hesitation.

"Well then, spit it out."

Nathan hesitated. "W-what do you need to know?"

"I'm not playing games here. Tell me now, otherwise—"

"Please, you don't need to do that. Just tell me what you want."

The old man ground his teeth, staring at Nathan in disbelief. For a moment, horrific silence filled the room.

"One last chance," he warned.

"I swear, I'll tell you everything. I just don't know what you want."

"You're a fool."

"No! *Please* don't!" Nathan cried out.

The old man rammed the hooked blade into Brohm's belly, piercing deep. With a swift pull across, a clean cut opened him up, blood and intestines pouring out. Brohm, hands chained to the ceiling, could only watch in horror and scream in agony.

Nathan shut his eyes from the grisly scene, but couldn't shut himself from Brohm's desperate wails. It lasted for what seemed an eternity, but finally, mercifully, he fell silent. Opening his eyes, he saw his limp body hanging from his bonds, gore everywhere. His stomach lurched, and he swallowed acrid bile.

The torturer stood next to the body, prodding it with the hooked edge. "He didn't last very long," he said, annoyed.

Turning his attention to Nathan, he slowly walked over to him. "So, how long will you last, Nathan?"

"Why are you doing this?" he asked, sobbing.

"Nathan."

He didn't know what to say. The old man crept closer, bloody hooked blade in hand.

"Nathan!"

"*What*?"

"Nathan, wake up!"

"W-what?"

* * *

"Wake up," Brohm said, pulling on his arm.

Nathan gasped for breath, finding the big man down on one knee beside him. The trees swayed above, warm summer air brushing across his sweaty face.

"You okay? You were tossing and turning. I reckon you were having a bad dream."

Nathan bolted up and hugged the big man fiercely, barely able to touch his fingers with his arms around his barrel chest. Caught off-guard, Brohm simply held still. After a moment, Nathan pulled away to find a bemused smile on the big man's face.

"What happened?"

Nathan tried to erase the image of Brohm's horrible death, and ignored his question. "How did you find me?"

"I followed your trail."

"My trail?" Nathan asked, surprised.

"I know you told me not to follow, but—"

"Gods. I'm so sorry, Brohm."

"What? Why?"

"For keeping you in the dark. I never explained why I said not to follow me. It seems death comes to everyone I know, and I don't want that for you."

Brohm waited patiently for Nathan to continue.

"But I feel . . . safer when we're together."

Brohm's face was unreadable for a moment, but then offered his crooked smile, puffing up his chest. "You feel safe with me around, huh?"

"Listen, I'll tell you the whole story. Then you can make the decision if we travel together or go our separate ways. But before we do that, we should set up camp."

After taking care of the horses, Nathan retrieved the bundle of food Griff had prepared for them. They decided against building a fire. The last thing they needed was more trouble during the night. They sat across from each other and began to eat, watching the sun near the horizon shine its golden rays through the trees, drawing long shadows.

"So what was it you wanted to tell me?" Brohm asked.

"I guess I should start with Graham."

"Who's that?"

"He was a merchant I knew. We were . . . lovers." Nathan stumbled on the last word, unsure of Brohm's reaction.

Once again, the big man's face became unreadable. "What happened?"

"Remember when we first met, I said someone died because they knew me? It was Graham."

"Did you find out who killed him?"

"Oh yes," Nathan said darkly. "I exacted my revenge right then and there. But you see, it was my actions that started the whole thing. I was to blame for Graham's death."

"Your actions? What do you mean?"

"I was hired to kill a mark, which I did. The mark's brother wanted revenge. He managed to find me, but killed Graham by mistake. It was at night, and we . . . we were sleeping in the same bed, you understand?"

Brohm nodded.

"The brother killed Graham, and it all happened because of me," Nathan said, staring into the setting sun.

"You loved him?" Brohm asked softly.

Nathan turned to gaze into his green eyes. They bore right through him. "I did."

Brohm offered a sorrowful smile. "Sorry."

Nathan stared back at the sun. Only the tip was left, its edges wavering. "After that, I vowed never to fall in love again. Never become attached to anyone. But that's something easier said than done."

"Have you thought of, you know, changing your profession?"

"This is all I know."

Brohm nodded. "Yuh, I hear you."

"But something's got to change. I *have* to change. I've lost two good friends now, and history has a bad habit of repeating itself."

"What did you do to Helmsley to make him so angry?"

Nathan sighed. "I took a contract around a year ago for his son, except I didn't know that detail until now."

Brohm's eyes went wide. "What? How could you *not* know who you were killing?"

"The client told me it was someone important, but didn't reveal who. The

coin he offered made up for the risk."

"But was it really worth it? The lives of your friends?"

Nathan looked back with hurt eyes. "Of course not, but how was I to know this would happen?"

"It's a big risk messing about with royalty," Brohm said. "You must've reckoned something bad would've come from it."

"I covered my tracks, but clearly not well enough. Samuel and Danny paid the price for my greed, and Helmsley's still out for blood. That's why I keep pushing you away. I don't want you killed like every other friend I've had."

Brohm pondered Nathan's words before speaking. "Well, even from all this death, you did save a life."

Nathan was puzzled.

"Mine," Brohm said. "All these actions ended with us meeting, and escaping."

Nathan wiped his eyes. "How did you end up in that cell anyway?"

"A fight at a tavern got out of hand. Some guy was pissing me off and I let my fists do the talking. I was pretty drunk and didn't know when to stop hitting. Didn't mean to kill the guy, it just sorta happened.

"I was lucky it wasn't the city watch that took me in. They wouldn't have left me in a cell long before deciding what to do."

Silence fell between the two men, allowing night insects in the darkening woods to fill the space.

"So, you know everything now. What should we do?" Nathan asked quietly, not wanting to break the silence.

Brohm seemed deep in thought, weighing his options before finally speaking. "Well, somebody's gotta protect you. I reckon it might as well be me."

"Be serious. Nobody said I needed your protection."

"I am being serious. I owe you my life."

"I hate to think you feel obligated because of that. If that's the reason—"

"It's not. I reckon we're better off sticking together," Brohm said. "Besides, I've grown mighty fond of you myself."

Nathan's heart missed a beat. "Why are you such a good friend to me?"

Brohm shrugged, and scratched his bald head, trying to hide his face. It was hard to tell in the failing light, but Nathan thought he was blushing.

"Maybe we should try to get some sleep, yuh? It's gonna be a long ride to my Pa's farm."

"How far is it?" Nathan asked.

"I reckon if we leave before dawn like we did this morning, we should get there before dusk. It's an easy road, but a long one."

They settled down and lay on the earthy floor of the forest, but Nathan wasn't tired. All he could think about was the man beside him. Nathan let out a sigh of resignation, knowing that the infatuation he had would only grow stronger.

In an attempt to quiet his thoughts, he gazed up at the stars peeking through the gently swaying leaves. They twinkled softly, and after a time, Nathan's mind was at peace.

CHAPTER NINE

Nathan woke to a gentle nudge. Opening his eyes, Brohm's large frame filled his view.

"We should get going," he said.

Nathan gazed through the trees of the small forest to glimpse sunlight just below the horizon.

"We should've already been on the road by now," Brohm continued, anxiously gathering tack and saddling their horses.

"Is your father going to mind us laying low at his farm?" Nathan asked as they led their mounts through the long grass. "I think it would be best he knew as little as possible, but it's going to be hard to not raise suspicions while we're staying there."

"No, he's uh . . ." Brohm's voice cracked. "He's off to a better place."

"Oh, I'm sorry," Nathan offered lamely.

"It's okay. It happened two years ago. He lived a good life." He seemed lost in thought, but continued after a moment. "He was in pain near the end. As hard as it was for me to let go, it was for the best."

"So there's nobody at the farm?"

Brohm nodded. "He'd left it for me, but farm life never was my thing. I should've sold the land but . . ."

Brohm didn't continue, and Nathan used his silence to drop the subject. Once they arrived at the road, they mounted up and rode south amid a sea of swaying grass.

The morning progressed slowly. They'd passed a few travellers, but no patrolmen. Nathan hoped Griff's warning of an army was overstated, and Helmsley would simply give up his search, but the pit in his stomach told him that was wishful thinking. Near noontide, they came upon a copse of trees near the side of the road. It was an odd landmark given the surrounding grassland countryside.

"Want to stop for a rest?" Brohm asked.

"Sure. Let's keep it short though."

They dismounted and led the horses ten metres off the road into the shade. While they ate, Nathan casually glanced over at Brohm. He seemed preoccupied, staring out at the long grass, hypnotized by the swaying movement. Once again, Nathan appreciated he didn't have the need to fill the quiet. As far as he was concerned, silence was golden, and it appeared his friend agreed.

The rhythm of distant hoofbeats broke through the gentle breeze. It was so quiet at first, Nathan thought he imagined it, but Brohm's concerned face told him otherwise.

"Stay put," Nathan said. "They might not even notice us here."

The four horsemen rode hard and fast, forming a large dust cloud in their wake. Nathan bundled up the rest of the food, storing it in his rucksack, then pulled up the hood of his cloak and sat with Brohm.

The riders looked to race right past them, but at the last moment, the lead man motioned to stop. Nathan cursed under his breath. The armoured man dismounted his horse and lifted his visor to stare them down. As Nathan feared, he wore the tabard of the king's army, and judging by his demeanour, was likely a knight. He walked proudly toward Nathan and Brohm, heavy chainmail ringing with each step, and a gauntleted hand sat on the pommel of his sheathed longsword.

"Hail and well met, good sir," Nathan said in a cheerful tone, pulling back

his hood slightly.

"We're in search of two men who match your description," he responded coldly.

"You are? I do apologize, but I believe you must have us mistaken for someone else. We are but simple travellers."

"What are your names?" he demanded.

"I'm Whitter, and this is my good friend Sid," Nathan said.

Brohm, surprised by Nathan's deceptive answer, nervously eyed the towering knight and nodded.

"Your friend can't speak for himself?" the knight asked gruffly.

"Please sir. You must—"

"I tire of this game. You are to come with us to Helmsley Keep. There we will discover if you're the men our lord is searching for."

A moment of silence passed, yet nobody moved.

"I'm afraid that won't be possible," Nathan said, dropping his smile.

"You think you have a choice?" he asked, motioning at the troopers still on horseback.

Nathan used that moment to jerk his dagger from its sheath and launch it at the knight's head. The action was lightning quick, and the troopers had no idea what'd happened until the knight fell backward with a dagger in his eye. They launched into action, yelling and scrambling off their horses.

To Nathan's relief, Brohm jumped to his feet with sword drawn and stormed past to take control of the situation. Nathan had been trained in stealthy manoeuvres, not direct combat, and at that moment wished he had a bow in hand.

The first trooper ran at Brohm recklessly. After one parry, the big man overwhelmed him and slashed at his throat. Blood sprayed across the long grass, and the man fell. The other two men approached Brohm with caution, seeing their comrade fall so easily to his blade.

"Come on. Let's have it!" the big man taunted, flashing the troopers a wicked grin.

Nathan used this time to pull the dagger from the knight's bloodied eye socket, and pushed the body over to retrieve the heater shield strapped to his back.

The troopers spread out to surround Brohm, and he assumed a more defensive stance, taking a few steps back to keep them in view. Nathan used the distraction to his advantage, and rushed to the closest man. Yet just as he was upon him, the trooper turned and slashed, the blade bouncing off Nathan's shield. The man continued to whale on him, trying to find an opening while Nathan dodged and blocked the blows as best he could.

Catching the rhythm of his assailant's attack, Nathan performed an offensive charge, slamming the shield against the trooper and kicking the side of his knee. The man yelled out in pain, exposing himself, and Nathan wasted no time to ram the dagger up into the soft flesh under his chin. The tip reached far enough to scrape the top of his skull, and with a twist, Nathan pulled it free. The man fell like a stone, twitching violently.

Down on one knee to catch his breath, he glanced over to Brohm, who was still toe to toe with the last trooper. They exchanged ringing blows, successfully parrying each attack in turn. Frustrated, Brohm lowered his guard for a careless thrust. The trooper blocked and returned with a slash at Brohm's exposed forearm.

Instead of showing pain, the big man roared in anger. Surprised, the trooper stumbled back, and Brohm kicked him to the ground. Looming above the

prone man, he rammed the sword through his chest, the chainmail melting like butter. The trooper managed an awful, wet gurgle, blood frothing at his lips. Brohm savagely booted the side of his head, rendering him unconscious.

"Shut up!" he bellowed.

He kicked again, just as hard. The head shifted to an odd angle, his neck clearly broken.

"And that's for my arm."

Nathan found himself holding his breath watching the violence unfold. Eyes filled with fire, Brohm scanned the area looking for more trouble. He locked onto Nathan who was still down on one knee, and in a heartbeat, the anger melted away, the fire dissipated.

"Nathan, are you okay?"

"I'm fine. You're the one who needs attention."

Brohm glanced down at his bloody forearm, annoyed. "It's nothing."

"Don't be ridiculous. Let me look at it."

Brohm bared his teeth from the sting as Nathan poured water over the wound. Once the blood washed away, they found the gash wasn't deep. Nathan tore strips of cloth from the dead knight's tabard and wrapped his arm in a tight bandage.

"This could've been a lot worse."

Brohm shrugged.

"You're a impressive swordsman. Why'd you attempt such a risky move?"

"I dunno. He was pissing me off hiding behind that shield."

Nathan couldn't help but smile and shake his head in wonder.

After wiping the blood and gore from their blades, they hastily dragged the four bodies into the long grass past the copse of trees. Nathan hoped the wildlife would take care of them before the stink of decay would divulge their location. While Nathan removed the tack from the horses, Brohm rooted through the saddlebags, finding coin purses, food, and four full wineskins.

"Not much coin," he said, weighing the small leather purses in his hand.

"It's better than nothing. We'll take what we can get."

Nathan dumped the tack alongside the bodies while Brohm slapped the horses' rears to force them north on the road. They watched the dust rise and blow off the road in the breeze.

"You realize we're creating a trail for them to follow," Brohm said solemnly.

"What are you talking about? We've removed any sign that those horses belonged to the king's army."

"Yuh. Well, doing that may throw them off for a while, but there's still four men missing."

"So? How will they know where they are?" Nathan asked, slightly flustered by Brohm's roundabout way of explaining his thoughts.

"Someone gave them the order to come this way. If a commanding knight and three troopers don't report back, more men are going to come looking for them."

"And how do you know this?"

"I used to work for the king's army," Brohm said plainly. "I know how they think."

Nathan was dumbfounded. "You were?"

Brohm simply nodded, watching the horses, now distant specks on the horizon. His eyes were full of worry. "Come on, let's go."

* * *

They pushed hard, wanting to get as much distance between them and the attack. The flat, grassy vista soon gave way to rolling hills, and distant southern mountains grew on the horizon.

By late afternoon, Brohm gave a signal to slow down. Nathan couldn't understand why until he saw a narrow road heading west. It was clearly unused, choked with grass and weeds. All that remained was the dry, impacted ground from cart wheels.

"This is it," Brohm said. "Over that ridge aways is my Pa's farm."

"Really? We got here sooner than expected."

They nudged their horses down the abandoned trail. Grassy meadows to the north gave way to fallow land, the vague hint of ploughed fields, all but eroded away from years of neglect. To the south, towering mountains yielded to a deciduous forest that lined its edge, acting as a border of sorts. Half a kilometre down the old road, a simple log house nestled in the trees came into view, looking out at the vast fields. The remains of a collapsed barn lay farther off.

"When was the last time you were here?" Nathan asked.

"I reckon a month or two after Pa passed on. Why?"

"It looks like someone might still live here. It looks pretty well-kept given the time that's passed."

Brohm eyed the house suspiciously.

After tying their horses to a hitching post nearby, they silently made their way to the veranda. There weren't any footsteps in the dirt, and the windows were grimy. Brohm tried the door but it didn't budge. He took a step back, and roughly shouldered the door. It burst open with a loud squeak, rubbing against the frame. Dust motes came to life from the sudden movement, accentuating rays of golden sunlight shining through the dirty windows. The whole room glowed a smooth amber, and the air was hot and stuffy, smelling of old wood.

"I don't reckon anyone's living here," Brohm said.

Nathan shook his head. "I guess not."

Despite the dust, the main room was in relative order with a large wood burning stove sitting in the far corner. In the centre sat a table with two chairs. A series of oil lamps hung from brackets on the walls. To the right, a small hallway led to other rooms, their doors closed.

Brohm unbuckled his sword belt and placed it on the table. Opening the windows on the three walls of the main room allowed a cross-breeze to enter the home after so many years. Surveying the room, his eyes drifted from one location to the next.

"You okay?" Nathan asked.

"Yuh. Just lots of memories."

Nathan left him to his thoughts and stepped back outside, walking around to the back of the house. The surrounding trees created a pleasant shade, and amid the tall grass he came upon a covered well. Pushing it aside, he peeked down, catching a glimpse of rippling dark water.

"Is the well dry?"

Nathan jumped back in surprise with a yelp. "Gods, you scared me. No, there's water down there, but it might be a little scummy."

Brohm gave him the same crooked grin. "For what I want, it doesn't matter."

He lifted his sweat-damp shirt over his head, revealing a wide chest and belly. He casually tossed the bucket into the well, and after hearing a splash,

proceeded to pull the attached rope arm over arm. Nathan found himself mesmerized at the sight of his muscles undulating smoothly as he lifted. Dripping bucket in hand, Brohm turned to him with a grin.

"I reckon this is gonna be cold."

Squinting his eyes shut, the big man dumped water over his head, soaking his trousers in the process.

"Yuh, it's c-cold," he gasped. "You wanna try? Once you get past the shock, it feels great."

His wet body glinted in the sunlight, accentuating his features. Nathan, mouth agape, blinked and shook himself from his reverie, casually trying to hide his excitement.

"Uhm . . . no, I'll pass," he said, offering a weak smile.

Brohm simply laughed.

* * *

Brohm remained shirtless as they led the horses to a grass-filled paddock behind the house. Nathan, as much as he tried, found it difficult not to ogle him. The big man either didn't notice, or didn't care. While Brohm filled the trough with water, Nathan removed the horses' tack and cared for them, brushing them down and inspecting for injuries. Once finished, he glanced up to find Brohm out of sight.

"Where'd you go?"

"Over here." Brohm's voice came from the west side beyond the house.

As Nathan rounded the corner, Brohm tossed something at him. Deftly catching it, he looked down to find an apple in his hand. "Where'd you get this?"

"Apple tree just yonder," Brohm said with a mouthful of fruit, thumbing behind him.

Nathan looked beyond in the failing evening light to see the tree, overloaded with apples.

"They're great. Not too sour," Brohm continued.

Nathan took a bite into the juicy fruit. "Gods, this is delicious," he said, licking his lips.

"Come on, let's get inside."

The oil lamps filled the main room with a comforting orange glow, and a crisp gentle breeze streamed through the open windows. For the first time in a while, Nathan felt truly safe. Tucked away out of sight, the house seemed invisible to the world.

He opened his rucksack to inventory the food they had. Meanwhile, Brohm took a lamp and stepped into the back rooms. Nathan heard him struggling to open a window, and after a string of curses, it finally gave way.

"Figured we'd get some air back there too," Brohm said.

Nathan nodded. "We've got enough food for a couple days, maybe more."

"We should make it last as long as we can. After what happened today, I don't want to go into town any time soon."

"You're right," Nathan said. "Aside from all the apples we can eat, we should probably go hunting."

"Yuh, there's always been deer in the area."

"There's only one problem. We've nothing to hunt with. I wish I had my bow."

"My pa had one. No idea where it might be though. Might've been in the barn."

"Good luck trying to get anything of use from that rubble heap," Nathan said. "You hungry?"

Brohm nodded with a grin and, still shirtless, sat at the table. Nathan wasn't about to complain. He never cared much for etiquette, and certainly not now. He brought bread, dried meat and two full wineskins to the table. Brohm's eyes lit up.

"Now I'm thirsty," he said, popping the stopper with a thumb and began guzzling the wine.

Nathan sat down across from him, popped the stopper from his own wineskin, and raised it up as though it were a tankard. "To our freedom, however hard we need to fight for it."

"Hear hear!"

They both took a healthy swig.

"Not bad," Nathan said.

Brohm belched. "As long as it gets me drunk."

"So I've got to ask, what were you doing in the army? You seem the last guy I'd expect there."

Brohm shrugged. "That was a long time ago. I was sixteen or seventeen when I left home. Pa had help tending the farm and didn't really need me. Anyway, I was bored working here, and I wanted some excitement."

"Did you find it?"

Brohm laughed. "Nah. It's glorified guard duty when there's no wars happening. But I stuck with it for eight years. The only good that came from it was the training. You know, fighting skills, learning to use a sword and shield. Stuff like that."

Nathan nodded. "I said it before, you're good with a sword."

"Yuh, trainer said the same thing when I was learning that stuff. Understanding that the sword was an extension of my body? Something like that."

"Did you ever take part in any interesting missions?"

"A few, yuh. But mostly, I got drunk in the barracks with the fellows."

Nathan chuckled.

"Later on, I met some guys who told me I could be making more coin working for them. They said my size was good for what they had in mind," he said with a wink. "So I left the army, and been working contracts since."

"More excitement doing that?"

"Yuh, more action for sure. Finally got to put my skills to good use," Brohm said, laughing.

They continued to drink into the night, managing to empty the four wineskins. All the while, Brohm carried on telling stories of his time in the army. Most of them ended with hilarious consequences, to the point where they found themselves laughing uncontrollably, gasping for breath.

Once the room started spinning, Nathan decided it was time for bed, but attempting to stand was a dismal failure. He flopped onto the floor like a puppet with its strings cut. Brohm laughed raucously, and Nathan couldn't help but join him, stuck in his awkward position. Using the table as a support, Brohm stood, seeming to have more luck with his balance.

"Don't worry l'il buddy," he slurred. "I'll help you out."

Brohm staggered to Nathan's prone body, and with easy strength, lifted him over his shoulder. His bare skin emanated a warmth that Nathan found comforting. Slowly standing up, the big man wavered in place for a moment, giggled to himself, and proceeded to lumber down the hallway to the back rooms. Using the walls as support, it was a bumpy ride, but he managed to

make it without falling over. After unceremoniously flopping Nathan onto the bed, he turned to leave.

"Sleep sleep," Brohm mumbled to himself, holding onto the door frame for support.

Nathan turned his head to see the hulking shadow filling the doorway. At that moment, he wanted so badly to hold him.

"Brohm," he managed to blurt out in his half-conscious stupor.

The big man stumbled to turn around, leaning against the frame. "Y-yuh?"

Words stuck in Nathan's throat, and after a moment, Brohm closed the door halfway.

"Night, l'il buddy," he whispered, assuming Nathan had fallen asleep. His shadow lumbered back into the main room, and one by one, the flame of each lamp went out until it was dark.

CHAPTER TEN

A knocking sound woke Nathan with a start. His head ached something awful, and it took a moment to recall where he was. Bright sunlight streamed through the window, and while he wasn't sure, he assumed it was late morning.

The sound of knocking came again. His ears rang and he winced in pain. Slowly turning out of bed, he sat, planting his feet on the rough floor. Massaging his temples helped ease the pain, if only temporarily.

Knocking again, more insistent this time, and he still couldn't figure out the source. He managed to lift himself out of bed, and shuffled into the hallway.

Knocking. Louder now. He stumbled into the main room and opened the front door. Light blinded him and he shielded his eyes from the rays.

"You're awake," Brohm said.

"No thanks to you." Nathan was unable to recognize his own voice. It was deep and gravelly.

"Oh, sorry."

Peeking through his fingers, Nathan saw him with hammer in hand, fixing the step off the veranda.

The big man chuckled. "Don't handle your booze so well, yuh?"

"You've got the size advantage. More of you to soak it up."

"I reckon so."

Nathan's attempt to swallow felt like sand scraping down his throat. "Water . . ."

"You go inside. I'll get you some."

Nathan nodded, and stumbled to the table, laying his head down. A few moments later, Brohm walked in with a dripping bucket, and filled a cup.

"Drink up," he said, nudging his shoulder.

Nathan quickly emptied it, unable to recall the last time he was so thirsty. Brohm filled it again, passing it back to him.

"How's the arm?" Nathan asked, noticing he'd removed the bandage.

"Fine. It's healing already."

Nathan inspected it and found no infection. After eating bread and drinking plenty of water, Nathan gradually started to feel better. While recovering, Brohm continued working outside, washing the windows with an old rag. Nathan wanted to help, but the big man insisted he go back to bed.

"There's lots of work to be done, and I reckon you'll get your fair share once you're feeling better," he said with a sly grin.

Nathan accepted that, shuffling back into his room and flopped into bed, falling asleep in moments.

* * *

"Nathan," a gentle voice called to him.

It was dark and he rubbed his eyes. Looking over, he found Brohm's face in deep shadow, lit by lamp light.

"How're you feeling?"

Nathan was confused. It seemed he lay down just moments ago. His mind was groggy, but his headache was gone. "Better, I think."

"You hungry?"

Nathan took a moment to ponder his question. "I think so."

"I went out to the fields later in the day. Found wild carrots and potatoes growing out there. Can you believe it?"

Nathan grunted, unable to join in his enthusiasm.

“Anyway, I made soup with them. I reckon you might be up to trying it.”

“Sure.”

Brohm grabbed the lamp and led Nathan to the main room, revealing a set table with two bowls and spoons. “I’ll warn you now. I’m no cook,” he said, stirring the contents of a pot with a ladle.

Nathan sat down, touched that he went through the effort. “Don’t sell yourself short. Let’s try it first before making judgement.”

Brohm filled the two bowls with watery soup containing chunks of vegetables, and joined him at the table. Nathan looked on as he experimentally ate a spoonful, and his face immediately turned foul.

“That good, huh?” Nathan said, cringing.

“If I had more ingredients, the soup part would’ve been better. All I had was salt.”

Nathan tried it. The soup was essentially brine. He couldn’t help but laugh, and Brohm joined him.

“I told you I’m no cook.”

Bypassing the salty water, they ate the vegetables instead. By that point, Nathan realized he was hungry, and helped himself to a second serving.

“Thanks Brohm. You may not be able to make soup to save your life, but I appreciate you trying.”

Brohm’s face flushed and he scratched the back of his head. “You looked awful green this morning. I just wanted to help you feel better.”

“I do. I’m sure by morning I’ll be back to normal.”

Silence fell between them. Their eyes met, and Nathan saw something profound in Brohm’s gaze, though he questioned whether his infatuation with the big guy was colouring his perceptions. Not knowing how to share his feelings without making an uncomfortable situation, he tore himself from his gaze and stood up.

“What’s wrong?” Brohm asked with concern.

Before attempting an answer, a sudden clatter of raindrops on the roof interrupted his thoughts. After the relative silence of their surroundings, the racket was nearly deafening. Brohm stared at the ceiling as though expecting leaks to appear. Nathan used the opportunity to stow his emotions, telling himself Brohm was a friend and nothing more. After the initial rush, the rain reduced to a soft patter, and satisfied to see no leaks forming, Brohm turned his attention back to him.

“So what’s wrong?” he asked again.

“Nothing.”

“You sure? It seemed like you wanted to say something.”

“I . . . I’m just tired,” he lied.

Brohm yawned, seemingly content with the answer. “Yuh, good call. It’s been a long day. I think I’m gonna bunk it.”

He grabbed one of the lit lamps and lumbered to his bedroom.

“Thanks again, Brohm.”

“Night,” he called out.

“Goodnight.”

Nathan extinguished the second lamp, and took the last one with him into his room. Sitting on the bed, he drew a deep breath. Try as he might, he couldn’t get Brohm out of his thoughts. He snuffed the flame, and lay back, staring into the blackness of the room.

While listening to the rain, ghostly afterimages danced across his field of view. At first they were just shapes, but soon coalesced to a man’s face. Details emerged, but it wasn’t a face Nathan recognized.

Slow yet steady, the face began to distort. A sickly grin revealing elongated sharp teeth. Its eyes became beady and sunken in. The face gave way to acute, daemonic features. Heavy breathing filled his ears, followed by a ragged laugh, low and menacing.

"Come now. I'm waiting for you," it growled.

Nathan choked with panic. He shut his eyes, but the hellish visage remained, filling his vision as it hovered closer. Unable to take any more, he bolted up from the bed to escape, and the face disappeared.

He found himself in a cold sweat, panting heavily. It didn't feel like a dream, but it had to be. He shivered at the memory of the face burned in his mind. Reluctantly, he lay down again and all remained still. The continuing rain soothed his nerves, yet sleep still eluded him. He knew it was going to be a long night.

* * *

Nathan woke from his uneasy slumber when he heard Brohm step into the main room. The rain had subsided some time during the night, allowing the rising sun to colour the clouds with vivid shades of red and purple. Nathan still felt haunted by the remnant memory of the face, but hearing Brohm walking about dulled his fears. Knowing it was unlikely he'd fall back to sleep, he decided to get up and join him.

"What happened? You look awful," Brohm said.

"Do I?" Nathan asked, rubbing his face. "Yeah, bad dreams."

"Again? You seem plagued by them. Is that normal for you?"

"No. I wish I knew why I was having them."

After a simple breakfast, they started cleaning the house in earnest. Nathan swept dirt and dust outside while Brohm pulled the sheets from the bed.

"They're kind of musty," he said, dragging an old washtub. "I reckon I'll give them a good scrub."

While Brohm worked outside, Nathan finished cleaning the inside windows, surprised by how much light it brought into the room. Peeking through, he spied Brohm bent over the tub, scrubbing a sheet on a washboard. He'd removed his shirt again and his skin sheened with sweat, steaming in the chilly early-morning air. Nathan enjoyed the view from his unnoticed vantage point for a while longer before returning to work.

Later that morning, while Nathan was stowing apples he'd picked, Brohm stepped in wearing nothing but his breeches. Turning at the sight, Nathan nearly tripped over his own feet. While his breeches were loose fitting, a considerable bulge didn't leave much to the imagination.

"Okay, off with your clothes," Brohm demanded.

Nathan laughed nervously at the ridiculousness of his request. "Excuse me? Did I miss something?"

"My clothes needed a good scrub, and I'd say yours are due too."

"Well, uhh . . ." Nathan gibbered.

"Off with them, stinky," Brohm said with a grin and stepped outside.

"Okay okay, I can take a hint," Nathan called out, laughing.

While stripping down to his loincloth, he couldn't help not be aroused by Brohm's sudden nakedness and forward nature. Stepping barefoot through the tall grass, he'd found the day had warmed up considerably. Brohm had tied a length of rope between two trees to hang the sheets and his clothing, left to billow in the fresh breeze. Nathan stood before him, trying lamely to hide his arousal. Aside from a quick glance, the big man didn't offer any comment.

Nathan dumped his doublet, shirt and trousers into the water, dropped to his knees, and got to work. Meanwhile, Brohm pulled more water from the well and dumped it on himself. With wet hands, he scrubbed at his body, washing grime and sweat from his skin.

"I'm done. You're next," Brohm said, sloshing the bucket of water.

Nathan turned from with his work to look over. The soaked breeches now hugged his body, practically see-through. Nathan tried his hardest to stare up at Brohm's face while he spoke.

"Don't even think it. That cold water would likely stop my heart from shock."

"You'll be fine," Brohm said nonchalantly.

"Don't be so sure. I don't have a protective layer shielding me from the cold like you do."

Brohm paused a moment, his face turning dark. "Are you calling me . . . fat?"

Nathan couldn't tell if he was serious or joking, and tried his best to backpedal without hurting his feelings.

"Well, uh, you've got some fat over that muscular frame of yours. It's not a bad thing," he said nervously while Brohm loomed over him.

Without hesitation, he dumped the water over Nathan. He gasped for breath from the sudden jolt and fell over onto the ground. Brohm burst into laughter and pulled up another bucketful before Nathan could fully recover.

"Of course I'm fat," Brohm said with a grin, slapping his belly. "And now, you're much cleaner."

He poured more water over Nathan's prone body. It wasn't as bad the second time, but he couldn't stop from shaking.

"Gods, that's c-cold."

Brohm laughed and offered a hand, easily pulling Nathan to his feet. With a friendly slap on the back, Brohm lumbered off toward the apple tree while Nathan looked on. Glancing at his clothes soaking in the water, he decided they were clean enough, and hung them with the other laundry drying in the sun.

He found Brohm leaning against the tree, eating an apple while staring out at the neglected fields. Until their clothes were dry, work would have to wait, so he lazily strolled the grounds. The warm sun felt good on his chilled skin, and the long grass tickled his exposed legs as it swayed in the breeze. Distant birds sung cheerfully. He couldn't help but smile.

Yawning, he lay in the grass and gazed up at the blue sky, dotted with small fluffy clouds. Heavy footsteps approached, and Brohm's large frame came into view.

"Comfortable?" he asked.

"Yeah. Care to join?"

"Sure." He lay beside Nathan, hands behind his head. "I could get used to this," he drawled.

Nathan grunted softly in agreement. Silence fell between them, and in his relaxed state felt himself falling into sleep.

"So, I've been thinking," Brohm said, causing Nathan to jerk awake. "As nice as this is, I don't know if staying here's a good idea."

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"I'm worried we'll be found."

"Brohm, this place is in the middle of nowhere. We'll lay low for a while until things cool down, and then poke our heads out to see what's going on. Okay?"

"I guess." The big man didn't sound convinced.

Nathan sat up and looked over at his mostly naked friend, feeling a stir in his loins again. "You know, for a guy who can clearly take care of himself, you sure worry a lot."

Brohm shrugged. Nathan resisted the urge to hug him in a veiled attempt to ease his fears. Instead, he opted to give his shoulder a friendly squeeze. Brohm lifted himself up on his elbows, eyes resting on Nathan's crotch for a moment before offering him a droll grin. Nathan glanced down, embarrassed to see his manhood continuing to betray his thoughts.

"You like what you see," Brohm said bluntly. It wasn't a question.

"Brohm, I—"

Nathan cut himself short. It was obvious he knew the truth, and any attempt to say otherwise was pointless. "Yeah, I do."

Brohm offered his same crooked grin. "I never had a guy say that to me before."

Nathan swallowed and asked the question he needed to know. "Do you like . . . men?"

"Well, I've never been with one, so I wouldn't know."

Nathan was confounded. "Either you like men, or you don't."

"I reckon it's not that simple," Brohm said, shrugging.

Nathan couldn't comprehend his baffling thought process, and noted he'd managed to skirt the question, but instead of badgering him, he decided to let it go.

"Well, the secret's out. I like you," Nathan said. "And I can't begin to explain how much that scares me."

"Why?"

"Remember what I said? History repeats itself."

"What? So, you reckon I'm gonna get killed because you like me?"

Nathan realized how silly it sounded, but nodded anyway.

"Well it doesn't really matter if they catch us. If they do, we'll both be dead, or worse."

Nathan's heart sunk at the cold reality he painted. "Damn it. Why'd you agree to stick together with me?"

"I told you before. I like you too, l'il buddy."

To Nathan's surprise, the big man leaned over and smacked a noisy kiss on his forehead, followed by a playful push that knocked him off balance and sprawled in the grass. Brohm chuckled and rose, leaving Nathan dumbfounded.

His heart raced, filled with giddy excitement, and his skin tingled where his lips had touched him. The kiss almost seemed platonic, or perhaps it was Brohm's take on being humorous. He decided it was best not to pry for its meaning, but he hoped Brohm would give him a real answer to his question one day soon.

Their clothes dried quickly in the breeze, and they dressed before lunch. He was relieved to be clothed again. Seeing Brohm practically naked for any period of time didn't help his growing lust for the man. Later that afternoon while pulling sheets from the line, he heard distant hoofbeats coming from the road. Peeking around to investigate, he saw men-at-arms on the horizon.

"Brohm!" he cried, hurrying into the house.

"What's wrong?"

"I think they're here."

Wide-eyed, Brohm rushed to the window. "They're too close. They'll see us run and catch us."

Nathan grabbed the sword belt and scabbard leaning against the wall, tossing it to Brohm, then rifled through his rucksack to find his dagger.

"Gods, there's at least a dozen of them. We can't fight them all off," Brohm said.

"Well I'm not going to just stand here and let them take us. What else are we—"

"Wait! I completely forgot."

Brohm scrambled across the room to the south-west corner. He jammed his fingers into the space between the floor planks and lifted to reveal a hidden trapdoor. "Quick! Get in."

Nathan wasted no time and jumped down into the blackness. It was only a metre deep, forcing him to crawl in. He grimaced as spiderwebs coated his face. Looking back, he was alarmed to find Brohm hesitantly peering into the dark.

"What are you doing? Get in here, quick!"

"I-I'm afraid."

"I'm right here. Jump down. There's nothing to be afraid of."

Brohm tentatively stepped down and crouched on his haunches, yet he wasn't low enough to close the trapdoor. Hoofbeats slowed and stopped, and indistinct yelling of men giving orders told them their time was up.

"Brohm, close the door," Nathan whispered hoarsely.

"I can't. I can't do this," Brohm said, starting to climb out.

Nathan reached out, grabbing his arm and pulled him to the ground. A solid knock at the front door shook the foundation.

"King's guard! Open up!" The voice meant business.

Nathan clambered over the big man and shut the trapdoor just as a strong kick bashed the front door open. Nathan lay on Brohm's prone body to hold him down, covering his mouth with a hand. Three heavily armoured men, visible through the small gaps in the floorboards, rushed in with swords in hand. Two stormed down the hallway, their weighty boots rousing dirt and debris that fell through the cracks. After a moment, they returned.

"Nobody's here," one of the men said.

Someone spoke outside, and the lead man glanced out the rear window.

"Stephens found horses out back. They can't be far."

The men tromped outside in quick order, and Nathan leaned over to whisper into Brohm's ear. "You need to get control of yourself."

Brohm nodded, trying to slow his frantic breathing. Nathan released his hold, manoeuvring to sit with his back to the earthen wall, and the big man crawled up beside him.

"I don't know how long I can stay down here," Brohm said, his voice wavering.

"You need to. You just have to fight it—"

Heavy steps on the veranda cut him off. They peeked through the cracks, glimpsing a view of a lone man. Stepping slow and deliberately into the main room, he scanned the area. There was a sureness in his gait, and clearly wasn't a common trooper. The bulky plate armour and impossibly large broadsword belted to his waist added to his stature.

"Where are you maggots hiding?" he asked himself, his voice gruff and raw.

He continued his slow stride, stopping at the table in the centre of the room to sat down, wood creaking under the weight. Nathan glanced over to Brohm, his face dripping with sweat, breathing shallow and quick. He held his hands firmly in an attempt to offer him strength.

A trooper entered the house, snapped to attention, and addressed the sitting

man. “Knight-Commander Garricus.”

“Report, lieutenant,” he grumbled, tapping his gauntleted fingers on the table.

“We’ve not found the brigands, and there’s no trail leading from this place”.

The Knight-Commander sighed. “It shouldn’t be this difficult to find two men.”

The lieutenant stood silent while Garricus thought, his fingers still strumming the table.

“We don’t have time to wait. Gather the troops. We ride south. Dismissed.”

The lieutenant offered a crisp salute, and hurried out the front door. Garricus stood, and glanced about the room one last time before exiting. The squad made a hasty departure, and all was quiet.

With a sudden gasp, Brohm ripped his hands away from Nathan and scrambled to the trap door. Light streamed in, and a glint deeper in the crawlspace caught Nathan’s eye. While Brohm escaped, Nathan investigated the source of the shiny object.

His vision now sensitive in the dark, he discovered wooden crates and leather sacks. The glint was a steel cap-end of a bow, sticking out from one of the open crates. Alongside it was a quiver of arrows. Grabbing both, he climbed out, finding Brohm standing near the exit of the house.

“Look what I found. I think this’ll come in handy,” Nathan said.

Brohm didn’t budge.

“You okay?” Nathan asked.

Brohm turned with clenched fists and a red face. “No, I’m not okay! I nearly got us caught because of . . . *that*!” he cried, gesturing violently at the trapdoor.

“But we didn’t get caught. It’s okay,” Nathan said quietly in an attempt to pacify the big man.

“Oh sure, except you had to hold me down like a beast. Gods! What good am I to you if I’m afraid of something so stupid?”

“Brohm, calm down.”

He ignored him and stomped out the open front door, spitting curses and kicking at rocks along the path, wandering into the overgrown field.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Nathan sat on the veranda in the late afternoon sun, testing the bowstring he'd restrung. Despite being worse for wear, there was still flexibility left, and the majority of the arrows were in fine condition. He took aim at a nearby tree. The flight was true and hit the mark. In the corner of his eye, Brohm's figure lumbered into view, returning from his hours-long walk.

"That was my pa's bow," the big man called out.

"I hope you don't mind me using it."

"Nah." He stepped up to the tree, pulled the arrow free, and handed it back to him. "Sorry about before," he mumbled.

"We all have our daemons," Nathan said, suddenly reminded of his vision from the night before.

"We have to go, don't we," Brohm said.

"Yeah. Looks like you were right."

"In my gut, I knew we wouldn't be able to stay here. Any idea where we should go?"

"North. I know someone in Morringstone who can probably hide us."

"Probably? That's a long way to go for probably."

"You've got a better idea?"

Brohm thought a moment and conceded, shaking his head.

"We'll only travel at night. It's going to be a long way around the northern mountain range," Nathan said.

"What about dead man's pass?"

Nathan looked up from his work. "It has that name for a reason. You ever been through it?"

"Yuh, once."

Nathan was surprised, but realized he shouldn't have been by now.

"It's not that bad," Brohm continued. "It's just cold when you get up higher. I reckon it's safer than the long road around. No patrols and such."

"Good point," Nathan said. "Okay, if you think we can make it through, let's do that."

"When?"

"We ride tonight. I don't want to be here if those men come back." Nathan headed back toward the house with Brohm in tow. "There's only one problem. If we're going through the pass, we'll need warm clothing. Where in hells are we going to get that?"

"I reckon there's old clothes in the crawlspace," Brohm said. "Pa was about your size, and there was stuff I never took when I left home."

With a lamp in hand, Nathan rummaged in the crawlspace while Brohm waited at the mouth of the trapdoor, nervously rubbing his hands. Amid the junk, he discovered old fur cloaks, thick woollen clothing, and blankets in two burlap sacks.

"We're in luck," Nathan said with a smile, pulling up the sacks.

Laying out the clothes to take inventory, they found them musty, but serviceable. He managed to arrange two sets of clothing for himself. Brohm only managed one set with an extra pair of trousers.

While Nathan packed the clothing neatly into small bundles, Brohm brought the horses to the front of the house and readied them for travel. Wineskins were filled with water. Blankets and the food that remained was packed. Weapons were belted.

Nathan secured the last saddlebag while Brohm performed a final pass through the house, confirming they'd not forgotten anything. After closing the

door and stepping off the veranda, he turned back to look at the house one last time.

"Bye home. See you soon . . . I hope," he said to himself.

Nathan offered a pat on the back. "Don't worry. When this blows over, you can come back."

Brohm seemed unconvinced. "Yuh, I guess."

"C'mon, big guy. Let's head out."

The golden setting sun was brushing against the grassland horizon by the time they hit the main road. Nathan felt the urge to look back at Brohm, and catching his eye, the big man offered him that same crooked smile. He still couldn't understand why he'd be willing to follow him anywhere, but felt elated knowing his back was covered. He hoped he could offer Brohm that same sense of security.

They rode hard into the deepening gloam, and birdsong gave way to the buzz and chirp of crickets. Into the darkening hours, Nathan was heartened that their way remained deserted, and his thoughts returned to the unknown ahead of them. They just needed to reach the crossroads and continue north. From there, they'd likely be safe from patrols and could travel at a more reasonable pace.

The moon had yet to rise, but the skies were clear. The long grass shifted to a bluish hue in the starlight, and the landscape took on a mysterious quality. Nathan found himself lulled by the repetitive scenery, and his eyes soon grew heavy.

"What's that?" Brohm called out, pointing down the road.

Nathan snapped to attention, glimpsing a sparkle of light far ahead of them. "It looks like a lantern or torch. Can you make out any details?"

"No. Do you think it's a patrol?"

"Let's not take the chance to find out."

They dismounted and led their horses into the grass. Once sufficiently far enough from the road, they crouched and watched the light slowly grow in size.

"They're taking their sweet time, yuh?" Brohm said impatiently after a few minutes passed.

Nathan shushed him and continued to watch in silence. The light revealed itself to be a lantern attached to a cart, a single rider at the helm.

"I think it might be a trader. Let's go out to meet him," Nathan said.

"I don't like it. It's risky."

"I don't see anyone trailing him. We're two, he's one."

Brohm glanced back at the road with apprehension.

"We need food," Nathan continued. "If that's a trader, he may be selling. We have to take this chance."

"Okay, but don't say I didn't warn you."

They broke cover and headed back to the road with their horses in tow, quickly enough to arrive before the rider reached their location.

"Hail!" Nathan said as the lantern light hit their faces.

The rider jumped back in surprise. He was an older man with greying hair sticking out at all angles, covered by a hat that had seen better days.

"Eh, thieves? Just whad'I needed," he mumbled to himself, feebly reaching behind for a weapon in the cart.

"Whoa. Easy, friend. We're many things, but thieves we're not," Nathan said.

The rider considered them with narrow eyes. "Whadda doin' out here so late at night?"

"We could ask you the same thing," Brohm said.

"Yah, y'could."

He sat, unmoving, in silence. Nathan stole a look at Brohm, who shrugged his shoulders slightly.

"Are you willing to trade? We've got silver for food," Nathan said.

"Do ye now? Lemme hear the jingle-jangle."

"Jingle-jangle . . ." Nathan repeated slowly. "Oh, you mean this?"

He shook his coinpurse hanging from his belt. The few coins left inside chimed.

"Aye, ver'well. I thinks I can help ye."

The trader climbed into the cart, taking the hanging lamp from its hook. He continued to mumble to himself as Nathan and Brohm approached the side of the cart.

"What do you have?" Brohm asked.

"Lemme see now." The man rummaged through his stock. "I gots some fruits and vegetables, hardbread, dried beef—"

"We'll take the hardbread and beef. That should travel well," Nathan said.

"Aye, it will. We're ye boys headed?"

"That's our business," Brohm said with finality.

The trader eyed him with suspicion, and Nathan surreptitiously nudged the big man in the ribs.

"How much?" Nathan asked.

"How much ye got?"

Nathan untied his coinpurse and dumped the few coins left into his hand.

"With that, ye could take th' whole lot."

They completed their transaction and wished the trader safe journey.

"It's lucky we crossed paths," Nathan said as they watched the light of the trader's lantern diminish. "You were worried for nothing."

"Hey! Excuse me for being careful."

"I'm just teasing. I've no doubt your caution will save our hides one day."

Not long after they continued their way north, the moon broke from the horizon, and the additional light allowed them to safely push their mounts harder. The night seemed never-ending, and Nathan's exhausted body ached for rest.

In the early morning hours, just as colour was returning to the sky, he caught a glimpse of the crossroads in the distance. Without looking in either direction, they sped through onto the rarely used path. It narrowed, changing from gravel to hardened dirt, and the landscape altered from grasslands to scrubby brush. After ten minutes, Nathan gestured to slow down, and Brohm squeezed up beside him.

"You reckon it's safe to stop?" Brohm asked, his voice tired.

"Yeah. Let's find a place to rest."

"There's a bunch of trees over that hill."

Brohm led them two hundred metres west off the road to a small copse, and upon arriving, both felt it was a safe place to rest. They took care of the horses, and settled themselves nearby.

Nathan lay down on the hard ground as Brohm rummaged in a saddlebag for food. Nathan was starving as well, but his exhaustion was stronger still, and sleep quickly took him.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Nathan woke later that afternoon. Brohm lay dead asleep on his back, snoring lightly, his massive chest rising and falling. A small smile crept on Nathan's face as he watched, only to be interrupted by his fiercely growling stomach.

He eyed the saddlebag hanging from a low branch, and padded over to find the last of their original food store within. Despite his hunger, he forced himself to eat slowly. At the base of the tree trunk sat a wineskin filled with water. He popped the stopper and quenched his thirst. Sated, he lay against the trunk and watched the trees sway in the wind. After the long day they'd had, he wasn't in a rush to get moving, and he certainly didn't want to wake Brohm.

Hoofbeats approaching from the road east broke the silence, and scrambling to the edge of the copse, he spotted five men on horseback galloping north on the road. An attempt to make out details proved impossible due to the distance. Watching in anticipation, he silently pleaded for them to keep going.

It didn't work. They suddenly stopped and milled about, searching the area. One man retraced his steps, and then pointed in Nathan's direction.

"Brohm, wake up," he said as loud as he dared.

He tacked one of the horses, and then glanced back to see the men cautiously traversing the rough terrain toward them. Nathan ran to the big man, shaking him violently.

"Get up!"

Brohm woke with a start and pushed Nathan over. "Hey! What's the big idea?" he growled.

Nathan picked himself up. "We gotta run! They've tracked us down!"

"What? How—"

"No time. Grab the stuff."

Nathan rushed back to the treeline and hastily tacked the other horse. Brohm arrived with his sword already belted, and re-strung the saddlebag, all the while peering at the approaching group. The western sun, positioned in their favour, shone in the eyes of the five men, and simultaneously drew deep shadow where Nathan and Brohm stood. They led their mounts west through the trees and out the opposite side, revealing a featureless landscape beyond.

"There's nowhere to hide," Brohm said.

Nathan reached for his quiver and bow. "Come on, let's get some distance. I'd rather run than fight this bunch."

They urged their horses to gallop dangerously across the uneven ground, cresting small hills too shallow to hide themselves from view. Brohm called attention to a large outcropping to the northwest, and Nathan nodded in agreement, changing their direction. Glancing back, he caught sight of the men emerging from the trees. They rushed to the far side of the high jagged rock protruding from the earth, hiding them from their pursuers.

"You reckon they saw us?" Brohm asked.

"Hard to say. I couldn't tell if they were giving chase or just scouting."

Unsatisfied with Nathan's answer, Brohm sighed in frustration and dismounted. He jogged the short distance to the edge of the outcropping and peered over.

"You see anything?" Nathan asked.

Brohm pulled his sword from its scabbard, face red with anger. "Yuh, they're coming. I'm getting real tired of this."

Nathan dismounted, checked his dagger, and nocked an arrow while Brohm fell back to his position. "I won't fire unless they see us."

Brohm grunted affirmingly.

To their surprise, the riders charged past the outcropping without stopping. Nathan was about to drop to the ground when one trooper glanced back and saw them. Before getting a chance to alert his fellows, Nathan loosed an arrow. It lodged itself into the man's head, and he flopped over, falling off his mount.

Mayhem instantly ensued.

The two riders at the rear of the formation attempted to dodge the fallen body, but their mounts tripped on the uneven terrain, throwing them head over heels to the ground. Nathan used the distraction to nock another arrow, firing at one of the lead men. It flew wide, harmlessly grazing an armoured shoulder.

Brohm meanwhile ran headlong into the fray, waving his sword overhead and bellowing out a savage warcry. The two lead troopers leaped from their mounts to meet his attack. Keeping track of Brohm's wild movements, Nathan nocked a third arrow and aimed at the same lead man. It found its target, sliding through the man's neck. The trooper's sword clattered to the ground and he dropped to his knees, grasping at the grievous wound.

The remaining man glanced about at his downed fellows, and then back to Brohm. Teeth bared, he met him with a warcry of his own, exchanging heated sword blows. The trooper fought well, but ultimately Brohm's superior strength dashed the sword out of his hand. He rammed his blade deep into the trooper's belly, his leather armour offering no resistance. Stunned, the man dropped to his knees, and Brohm took a step forward, wrapping his hands around his head. With a swift jerk and an audible snap, the body tumbled to the ground in a heap.

Nathan reached the big man, finding fire in his eyes. "You okay?"

Brohm kicked the nearest body in response.

They inspected the two downed men flung from their horses. The first they came upon was sprawled face down. Pushing the body over revealed his head had smashed into a rock. Blood ran everywhere, and gore oozed from what used to be his face.

"I reckon the bugger didn't see that coming," Brohm said in a grim tone.

They found the second trooper lying on his back, unharmed yet unconscious.

"What should we do with him?" Nathan asked.

Brohm kicked the man roughly in an attempt to rouse him. When that didn't work, he kicked again. "Get up!" he bellowed.

The trooper came to, groaning and rubbing his head. It took a moment to realize his predicament, and he flinched as Brohm loomed over him.

"You tell your boss to leave us alone, or there's gonna be more blood on his hands." To accentuate his point, he pulled his blade and held it to the man's throat. "Got it?"

The trooper nodded slowly, and glanced with wide eyes at his fallen comrades. He swallowed hard.

Brohm sheathed his sword. "Good. Now get going."

The man, still in shock, remained motionless.

Brohm shook a fist. "Don't make me change my mind. Go!"

The trooper found his wits and scrambled to the nearest horse, tripping over his own feet on the way. Climbing up, he glanced back at the two of them, fear still staining his features. With a kick in the horse's flank, rode off back the way he'd come.

Nathan tentatively laid a hand on Brohm's shoulder, feeling his tense muscles jerk at the touch. "Come on. Let's get back to the road before it gets

dark."

Brohm grunted reluctantly.

* * *

They travelled the dirt road, its direction shifting northeast once dusk was upon them. Nathan sensed Brohm's stewing anger, wishing he could take it away, but found it hard to think positive himself given the circumstances. The countryside remained sparse as they rode through the night, and once the early morning sun made its appearance, they decided to stretch their legs and eat.

"How're you doing?" Nathan risked asking.

"Fine. Sorry about before. I'm just tired of being chased."

Nathan sighed and nodded. At that moment, he felt their escape was hopeless, that they were delaying the inevitable, but he decided to keep his grim thoughts to himself.

"I hope your friend in Morringstone can help us out," Brohm said.

"I know he's helped a few guys to disappear, so to speak. I've no idea what's involved though."

"Do you trust him?"

"Trust?" Nathan hesitated before continuing. "We didn't part ways on the best of terms. Regardless, I still think it's the best option we have right now."

Brohm looked down at the bit of jerky in his hand, and passed it to him. "I'm not hungry anymore," he muttered. "I reckon we should get moving."

Hours passed riding through the foothills, and as the sun rose, it lit the great mountain range to the north. Layers of misty peaks, most of them snowcapped, reached beyond their view. Scrubby brush gave way to gravel and rocky terrain. The road diminished to a narrow lane once they made reached the entrance of the pass. They slowed to a trot and Brohm led the way.

"When did you travel through this pass?" Nathan asked.

"It was a long time ago, before I left home. I was with my pa."

"You remember the way?"

"It's not a maze or anything like that. I remember there was always just a single pathway."

"Hopefully that path's still there," Nathan mused.

They reached the entrance proper, the trail worming its way around large boulders as it ascended. The incline was gentle and their horses were able to traverse the path with relative ease. Towering rock and steep cliff faces on both sides clearly defined the pass, setting their way in deep shadow.

The morning dragged on, and he caught Brohm yawning more than once, mirroring his own weariness. The feelings of despair that burdened Nathan had lifted. He felt safer in the pass, knowing it was unlikely they'd run into patrols, or anybody for that matter, and hoped the long way through would give them a reprieve from the chase.

"You want to stop and rest?" Nathan asked.

"We should push on as long as we can. Travelling at night isn't a good idea."

Nearing noontide, shadow gave way to sunlight beaming overhead. The temperature had dropped imperceptibly over the course of the morning, and he enjoyed the warmth the sun brought, but before long, it moved on, leaving them in shadow again. By mid-afternoon, they'd climbed out of the gorge and came upon a small clearing amid the mountains.

"I reckon this would be a good place to call it a day, yuh?" Brohm said,

dismounting and yawning again.

Tall crags surrounded the narrow clearing, and Nathan judged it around twenty metres wide and one-hundred metres long. The ground was mostly bedrock, with weeds and hardgrass sprouting out through the cracks. A dead, leafless tree loomed nearby. Its wind-blown limbs reminded Nathan of an old crone reaching for them with long, gnarled fingers.

They gathered wood and set up camp where sheer rock of an overhead cliff shielded them from the wind. Once settled, they sat with their backs against stone, and ate while surveying the area. There was a gentle silence, broken only by the echo of sporadic raven caws.

Nathan was exhausted, and given Brohm's constant yawning, assumed he felt the same, yet night was still hours away. Regardless, he slouched back a bit and allowed his heavy eyes to close, telling himself it would just be for a few minutes.

He thought he heard distant footsteps and opened his eyes, surprised to find emerging stars twinkling in a darkening sky, and the orange remnants of daylight glowing above the western spires. His brief respite had become a long nap, and he couldn't decide if he'd imagined the footsteps. He shivered in the cold. The campfire they'd set up earlier wasn't lit, and Brohm was nowhere to be seen.

"Brohm?"

No answer came, and a sudden sense of déjà vu hit him. Instead of calling out again, he rose and stepped along the narrow clearing toward the path. Deep, uneven gashes in the craggy walls constructed stark shadows that played tricks in his eye. He stopped, examining one area to his right, questioning if he saw movement. The sound of water splashing came farther ahead, and he shivered again, suddenly feeling uneasy.

"Brohm," he said, nearly a whisper.

Still no answer.

Nathan trudged on, nervously glancing both ways for any sign of movement while his imagination continued to play tricks on him. The sound of water halted and everything fell silent, except for a noise he couldn't place. Faint and uneven rustling movement, possibly an animal. He instinctively pulled his dagger.

Suddenly, a large shape emerged from one of the dark gashes on his left. It was Brohm, and he yelled out in surprise, reaching for his sword.

"Gods, it's only you," Nathan said, sheathing his dagger. "What are you doing?"

"Can't a guy take a leak in peace?" Brohm asked after recovering from his fright.

The mysterious sound of water suddenly made sense to Nathan, and he burst out laughing.

"What's so funny?" Brohm asked, annoyed. "You keep catching me doing my business."

"I'm sorry," Nathan said in between laughing fits. "Gods, you scared me so badly."

"I scared you? You scared *me* half to death sneaking up like that!"

Once they returned back to their camp, Nathan couldn't help shivering again.

"You cold?" Brohm asked.

"Yeah."

Nathan fished out a woollen shirt and trousers from his rucksack, along with a thick blanket. The garb was large enough to wear in layers over his clothing

to hold in the warmth. Meanwhile, Brohm started a fire, the dry wood catching easily. Given the amount of wood they scavenged, it was small, but enough to keep their sheltered corner warm.

"Thanks," Nathan said, warming his hands.

Brohm smiled and nodded.

"Aren't you cold?" Nathan asked, noting Brohm had never changed into his warmer clothing.

"Nah, I'm always too hot. This cooler air feels nice."

Nathan reached over to touch his exposed neck. It was warm like an oven. "Whoa, you weren't kidding."

Brohm laughed.

They sat together for a while, losing themselves in the hypnotic flames. Bizarre animal calls echoed distant in the dark. Brohm yawned, his eyes weary.

"You shouldn't have let me nap for so long," Nathan said. "I'm not tired at all."

"I didn't want to wake you up. You looked so peaceful. Anyway, I reckon we should take turns keeping watch tonight."

"Yeah, good call. You sleep. I'll stand watch, and wake you up later."

Brohm lay down on his side, closing his eyes, and in mere moments was breathing deeply, fast asleep. Nathan covered him with the blanket, content to watch him sleep for a time.

The strange calls returned, but still distant enough to not be a cause for alarm. As the evening wore on, Nathan made a few rounds, but decided the area was secure enough that he could remain near the fire.

Hours passed into the night, and his eyelids grew heavy again. He placed the remaining logs onto the glowing embers to renew the fire, and then shuffled over to Brohm's prone body, gently shaking his shoulder.

"Brohm?"

He stirred from his sleep with a snort.

"Your turn," Nathan said.

Brohm seemed confused for a moment, looking at him through half-closed eyes. "Yuh, okay l'il buddy," he mumbled, yawning.

They traded places, and Nathan tucked himself under the blanket, finding the stone ground warm where Brohm had been. He snuggled into the warmth as best he could and let sleep take him.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The next morning greeted them with grey skies and a chill wind. Brohm sat nearby, idly poking the ashes of the long dead fire with a stick. He hadn't changed into his warmer clothing, but had donned a fur cloak with the hood up.

"Morning," Nathan said.

The big man looked over and offered a nod. "You sleep okay?"

"Fine. It really cooled down though. You sure you aren't cold?"

"Nah, this cloak'll be fine for now."

Nathan donned his own cloak, flipping up the hood to cover his frozen ears. The wind, while not blowing hard, was relentless. They ate a quick breakfast, mounted their horses, and made their way onward up the narrow mountain path. The steep rock face continued on both sides as before, channelling the wind to blow at their backs, pushing them forward. Nathan was thankful it wasn't blowing the other way.

Once reaching the end of the narrow pass, they found themselves surrounded by a vast mountain range. Without the sun, the passing of time was difficult to judge, but he assumed three or four hours had passed. Peaks of all sizes reached out to the sky. Most were snow-covered, and those tall enough pierced through the clouds. The unspoken, stark beauty took Nathan by surprise.

Outside the protection of the towering stone walls, the wind whipped around in all directions. Hoods drawn forward and heads down, they continued their way along the gravel path. Just before sunset, the clouds finally broke, offering them an extra hour of light before having to stop for the night.

"I guess it was foolhardy to think we'd find anything to burn out here," Nathan said while caring for the horses.

The harsh environment was barren, only allowing for sparse hardgrass to sprout from cracks in the rock. Nearby, Brohm sat inside an alcove in a small outcropping of rock they'd found.

"Don't worry, we'll be fine. Hurry up and come eat," he said, beckoning.

Nathan finished his work and sat opposite him inside the alcove. Brohm, sweat rolling down his brow, passed some jerky with a shaky hand.

"Are you okay?" Nathan asked, touching his forehead. "Are you coming down with fever?"

Brohm avoided his gaze. "No, it's just . . ."

"What's wrong?"

"I'm trying to . . . what do they call it when you want to get used to something?"

"Acclimatize?"

"Yuh yuh, I wanna 'climatize myself to caves and stuff."

Nathan glanced about the small alcove. It didn't go any farther than five metres into the rock. "This is hardly a cave," he said, chuckling.

Brohm looked hurt. "Don't laugh."

"Sorry."

"After what happened back at the farm, I knew I had to fight this thing. This stupid fear!"

"What can I do to help?"

Brohm simply shrugged his shoulders. Nathan scooted over beside him, having to duck his head from hitting the low ceiling, and leaned against his large frame.

"You just need to be rational about it."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, why are you afraid of enclosed spaces? Did something happen to you when you were a kid?"

Brohm pondered a moment. "I don't reckon so—"

"Wait a minute. When we met, you were in that underground cell. You seemed fine, all things considered."

"Yuh, but that's different than this."

Nathan shook his head in confusion. "What exactly are you afraid of?"

"It's hard to explain."

It was obvious he was hiding something. "Okay. What's stopping you from crawling to the end there?"

"N-no. I don't want to," Brohm said, an edge of panic in his voice.

"Just do it. Fight this fear head-on and maybe it'll just go away."

Brohm was unconvinced, glancing at the darkening hole from the corner of his eye. Nathan, growing frustrated, clambered to the back of the cave.

"No, no. Don't!" Brohm cried, grasping at his legs.

He fought the big man's attempt to grab him, leaving him sprawled and twisted on his side.

"You see? There's nothing to be afraid of," Nathan said, smacking the wall with a fist. "Just come here."

Brohm remained frozen in terror, arms outstretched from his attempt to hold Nathan back. Mouth moving, he tried to speak, but no words came out.

"Come to me," Nathan said.

Closing his eyes and drawing a deep breath, Brohm slowly crawled toward him. After a few torturous moments of advancement, he peered back at the cave's entrance.

"No! Look at me, not out there."

They locked eyes. Brohm froze again, and Nathan held his hands out, gesturing for him to keep on. After another focused breath, he made his way deeper on shaky hands. Nathan managed to grab him once he was in range, helping to pull him up. They sat side by side, backs to the wall, staring out at the entrance. Had Nathan not known better, he would've assumed Brohm was suffering from hypothermia due to his trembling. The radiant heat emanating from the big man told him otherwise.

"You see? Nothing to be afraid of," Nathan said quietly, wrapping a comforting arm around him.

Brohm simply nodded and pulled him close. With Nathan's ear mashed against his chest, he could clearly hear Brohm's heart beating madly. His own heart raced now, but for entirely different reasons, and he tentatively wrapped his free arm across Brohm's belly. They remained still, watching the last of the light fade from burnt orange to deep purple.

"You okay?" Nathan asked.

"Mmhm . . ." His voice rumbled in his chest.

"I don't think we'll need to stand watch tonight. We should get some sleep."

"Yuh."

"I'll get the blankets."

Nathan unwrapped himself, feeling the sudden cold air on his skin that was protected against Brohm's warm body. Quickly retrieving the blankets, he settled himself beside the big man, and lay down, attempting to find a comfortable spot where rocks didn't jut into his back. Brohm remained sitting, staring out into the black night. Nathan had nearly drifted off to sleep when Brohm's low, rumbling voice broke the silence.

"Thanks for being such a good friend to me."

Nathan stirred. "Likewise, big guy."

"When you're with me, things don't seem so bad."

He didn't know what to say. Instead, he found Brohm's hand in the dark and they interlocked fingers. Actions spoke clearer than words ever could.

* * *

They hit the trail well before sunrise. The winds had died down overnight and the sky had completely cleared up. Nathan drew in the crisp air deeply, exciting his senses and waking his tired body. He hadn't slept much. Most of the night, his mind raced thinking of Brohm, and his loins ached from the lack of release he craved.

Over the course of the day, the trail wormed its way around huge boulders and through deep, narrow chasms. All the while, the towering mountains acted as silent guardians, allowing them passage through their lands.

As late afternoon approached, a gully filled with brush and windblown trees came into view, and they decided to set up camp. Gathering wood was an easy affair, and the two quickly amassed a sizable pile that would last the entire night.

The sun had already dipped out of view behind the looming mountain to the west, creating a false dusk, but Nathan knew it would be many hours before the sun would truly set. Regardless, with nothing else to do, he decided to start the fire. Brohm sat nearby, watching him work.

"You know, things were looking a little grim before, but don't seem so hopeless now," Brohm mused.

"I feel the same way. Too bad we couldn't just hide out here forever."

"Well, why couldn't we?"

Nathan looked over in astonishment. "I'm as resourceful as the next man, but this is unforgiving territory. I don't think we'd last too long once our rations ran out."

"I guess."

"Don't worry. We'll get out of this mess one way or another," Nathan said.

Brohm gave him his crooked smile, and a prickling rush passed over Nathan's skin. "Gods, I love that smile," he mumbled.

"What?" Brohm asked.

"Nothing."

Night fell, but the raging fire kept them warm. Light flickered among the trees, projecting dancing shadows on the gully walls. A lone wolf howled, but so far distant that it was of no concern. Brohm had been doing most of the talking that evening, recounting more stories from his time in the army.

"This one time, the squad played a joke on our sergeant while in the field. When he was sleeping, we put crushed sumac in his skivvies," he said, chuckling.

"What? Why would you do that?" Nathan asked.

"No reason. The fellows in my squad, we were a bad influence on each other. Anyway, it wasn't worth the laughs. We had latrine duty for a straight fortnight."

"Serves you right."

They laughed.

"Those eight years seemed like a waste of time," Brohm continued, "but thinking back now, we had a lot of fun. Good memories."

"You miss your squadmates?"

Brohm nodded. “Lost touch with them after I left. Anyway, given the work I got myself into, I reckon it was for the best.”

Howling, closer this time, broke their conversation. They exchanged glances while the horses stomped their hooves in disapproval. Brohm went to soothe them while Nathan peered into the darkness in a futile attempt to see anything.

“As long as we keep this fire roaring, they’ll leave us be,” Nathan said, tossing another log into the flames, causing sparks to fly up into the sky.

Brohm returned and they sat quietly, anticipating more howling, but only silence filled the air.

“I’m beat,” Nathan said. “Can you take watch first?”

“Yuh, you sleep, l’il buddy.”

Pulling up a blanket, he lay down and closed his eyes. It felt as though only a moment passed when a hand roughly shook his shoulder.

“Nathan, wake up. We’ve got company.”

Judging by the fire, a fair amount of time had passed. He rose to survey the situation, and found Brohm with his sword in hand. The horses were skittish, frightened. Opposite them, a pack of wolves emerged from the black. Those still too far out to be lit by the fire could be seen as glowing eyes. Nathan counted a dozen, but knew there could be more unseen.

“I thought wolves didn’t like fire,” Brohm said.

Nathan pulled his dagger. “They must be ravenous, rabid, or both.”

In an attempt to make the fire larger, Brohm threw another log in. Sparks flew, causing the wolves to stop their advance for a moment. Unfortunately, it was short-lived and they continued their prowl, attempting to flank them.

“Protect the horses,” Nathan said, moving parallel to keep himself between them and the wolves.

Brohm followed his lead, yet kept his distance from Nathan in an attempt to cover the wide line of wolves stalking toward them.

“Come on then!” Brohm yelled out, raising his arms out to frighten them.

A few of the wolves barked and growled in challenge of Brohm’s display. Reaching the spooked horses, Nathan pulled his bow and quiver free. Brohm continued his show, keeping the attention of the snarling animals while Nathan nocked and aimed at the closest wolf.

“Ready?” Nathan asked.

Brohm stole a glance to Nathan’s position and tightened the grip on his sword. “Do it!”

The arrow whistled its short journey, piercing the wolf in the eye, and the others jumped back in surprise as it dropped dead. He nocked another arrow, aimed, and shot at the next nearest wolf. It found its target, lodging itself deep into the wolf’s neck. It didn’t take long for the animals to judge where the true threat was coming from, and charged Nathan with gnashing teeth. A third arrow, hastily shot, hit another wolf in its flank. The damage was negligible, and only fuelled its mad pursuit.

Brohm rushed to intercept the advancing pack, giving Nathan time to drop the bow and free his dagger. Once again, the ensuing direct battle had Nathan out of his element, and he stood defensively as best he could verses the pack of wolves.

Taking the blunt of the attack, Brohm clashed with them and swung his sword wildly, however a few dodged aside and ran past toward Nathan. The nearest wolf knocked Nathan down and lunged for his throat, falling onto his unseen dagger. He wrenched the blade, trying to inflict as much damage as possible. All the while, teeth repeatedly snapped just out of range.

Pushing hard, he managed to free himself from the bulk of the bleeding animal as another came at him from behind. With the dagger free, he twisted around and collided with it, stabbing into its neck.

Brohm held his ground, his stance low and wide. Swinging was keeping them at bay, but Nathan could tell he was tiring, and knew they would soon overpower the big man. He caught of glimpse of a thick branch resting in the fire, and scrambled to his feet to pull it from the flames. As he hoped, the end was burning brightly.

Holding it out like a lance, he charged the wolves, yelling to get their attention. Brohm sidestepped out of the way while Nathan swung at the pack. They reluctantly retreated, leaving one brazen wolf behind. The smell of singed fur quickly changed its mind, and it withdrew back into the dark.

Nathan stood there, waving the flaming stick to deter any possible return. Nearby, Brohm rested on one knee, leaning against his sword and panting heavily.

"I guess they *are* still afraid of fire," Brohm said between breaths.

After clearing the area of carcasses and checking on the horses, they returned to their camp. Nathan's mind was exhausted, but his body was shaking from the encounter.

"I guess it's going to be a long night," Nathan said.

Brohm nodded. In the distance, howling broke through the darkness. They exchanged glances.

"Yuh, I reckon neither of us is getting much sleep tonight."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Brohm was right. Neither had gotten much sleep. They took turns napping, but jolted awake at the smallest sound. When first light broke, both men were inwardly relieved the night was finally over.

Leaving the gully behind, they continued their journey across the barren mountain range, spending most of the day climbing the path in a series of switchback turns up a steep mountainside. However, upon reaching the summit, they found themselves still dwarfed by the seemingly never-ending parade of peaks surrounding them. At the higher altitude, the wind blew colder, and random patches of snow became more prevalent. The path also took a westward direction.

As evening approached, they scouted for a place to camp, but had no luck. Once the sun had dipped below the horizon, it quickly became bitterly cold, and the constant wind blew right through their clothes.

"Up there!"

Brohm pointed in the near dark to a recess in the rock twenty metres up the uneven mountainside. From their vantage point, it was difficult to tell if it was large enough to hold even one person.

"I'll go up and check it out," Nathan said.

The climb wasn't as treacherous as he expected, and found the recess wasn't a cave, but simply a crack in the side of the mountain. It was large enough for the two of them to spend the night, and most importantly, the surrounding walls acted as an excellent barrier from the wind. Nathan jumped his way down to find Brohm donning his woollen clothing.

"So you finally decided it was cold enough to put on some proper clothes?" Nathan chided.

"Getting there, yuh. I hope you have some good news."

"It's the best we're gonna find tonight. Let's grab the blankets, food and water, and head up."

"What about the horses?" Brohm asked.

Nathan shrugged. "There's nothing we can do. Let's just hope they'll be okay."

It was clear Brohm didn't like it, but knew Nathan was right. The big man had a tougher time scaling the rock, but managed to make it unscathed. Laying down a few blankets over the rough ground helped to create some comfort, and they sat in the dark, eating their boring meal.

"What I wouldn't give for a warm fire right now," Nathan said, rubbing his hands.

Brohm, stuffing a chunk of bread in his mouth, took Nathan's hands into his. In comparison to the cold air, they were burning hot, and sensation quickly returned to his fingers.

"Like a blacksmith's forge," Nathan said.

Brohm smiled. "Yup."

After eating his fill, Nathan lay down on his side and pulled up a blanket. The wind whistled through their small refuge, but down low on the ground, it was a negligible breeze. He watched Brohm, who peered up curiously at the night sky through the narrow chasm, and down at the horses on the path.

Nathan smiled to himself, feeling immensely safe. They were in the middle of nowhere, and he had a burly ally at his side. Hot, raw emotion suddenly filled his core and spread across his body, yet he shivered, his skin covered with goosebumps.

Brohm belched loudly, the sound reverberating in the small space. "Oops,

sorry," he said, packing the food back into a bag.

"Any idea how far it is to get out of this pass?" Nathan asked.

Brohm yawned and lay down beside him. "I reckon we're halfway through. There'll be a few more days of this cold weather, but we should be fine."

Nathan nodded and closed his eyes. "Goodnight Brohm."

"G'night," he said, resting on his back, continuing to stare up at the small patch of night sky.

* * *

Nathan woke to find himself on a desolate tundra of hard-packed snow and patches of ice. Beyond lay a flat and featureless horizon in all directions. White ground, blue sky. He shielded his eyes from the relentless sun. It sat large in the sky, yet offered no warmth.

For hours, he wandered the empty plains, never finding escape from the cold or blinding white. The sun seemed stuck in place, never shifting from its position in the sky. Finally collapsing to his knees, shivering uncontrollably, he gave up any hope and waited for the elements to take him.

A distant voice caught his attention. Scanning the horizon, he saw a black speck breaking the white continuity, barely able to make out the figure's arms waving overhead. The voice called again. He was unable to discern the words, yet the intonation seemed friendly, and given the circumstances, he didn't care if it was friend or foe. Pulling on his remaining strength, he stumbled his way toward the black speck.

Stepping onto a patch of ice, he slipped and fell, smashing his head against the frozen ground. The stark contrast of red blood splashed against white alarmed him, and he pressed a hand against the wound to slow the bleeding. He attempted to pick himself up, but his slow reflexes failed him and he slipped again, spraining his ankle and falling backward. Yelling out in pain and anger, he looked toward the horizon, hoping the person would come to his aid, but the black speck had disappeared. With nervous fervour, he surveyed the empty vista, but as he feared, the person was gone.

Despair took him, and he fell to racking sobs. The wound continued to bleed profusely, stinging his eyes and staining the icy white around him. He didn't care. He welcomed it to speed up the inevitable.

Then a hand grabbed his shoulder in a firm grip.

"*Nathan.*"

He recognized the voice, but couldn't put a name to it. After wiping his eyes, he glanced up with blurry vision. The figure stood in shadow behind the gigantic sun, its face obscured.

"H-help me," Nathan whispered.

"You'll be fine. Just take my hand," the voice said, calm and confident.

Reaching out with a bloodied hand, the figure accepted it and pulled him to his feet. The act of rising blinded him with a flash of light, and he let go in an attempt to shield his eyes. But even with closed eyes, all he saw was white. He felt weightless, and exhaustion left his body. A calm filled him, and all was silent.

"Are you still there?" he whispered.

"*I'll always be there for you.*"

The soft words surrounded him, its solemn vow filling him with an aching joy so strong he thought he would weep. Gradually, the world returned. Birdsong. A distant river flowing. A gentle breeze smelling faintly of jasmine. Warmth. He found himself naked, standing in a meadow of long grass

surrounded by trees.

"Nathan," the voice spoke behind him.

He turned to find Brohm stepping toward him, also naked, yet unconcerned. He took Nathan into his arms and held him fiercely.

"Thank you, Brohm."

The big man held Nathan's head, moving in to grant a passionate kiss. Instead, to Nathan's surprise, Brohm offered him a sly smile.

"You really need to take a piss."

Nathan, baffled by such a statement, realized he was right. "What? How—"

"You should really go." Brohm nodded sagely.

"But what about that kiss?"

* * *

Nathan jerked from his slumber and opened his eyes, confused. He found himself sleeping on his side, staring at the rock wall. Loud snoring assaulted his ears, and he felt a heavy weight along his side and a hand on his chest.

Gathering his senses, he pulled back the blanket to find Brohm's arm holding him close. The big man had snuggled up behind him, keeping Nathan comfortably warm. Despite two layers of clothing and his cloak, warmth emanated from Brohm all along his backside. He smiled, feeling Brohm's chest push against his back as he snored.

Then he felt something else: his bladder near to bursting. He slipped out from Brohm's grip, and braved the cold, stepping out of their little refuge. The wind had calmed, but the bitter cold persisted. While taking care of his business, he gazed up at the stars, telling him a few hours remained before daybreak. He finished and wormed his way back under the blankets, snuggling up against Brohm. Careful not to wake him, he delicately took the big man's arm and laid it over him as before.

Thankful that the snoring had subsided, he closed his eyes and tried to get back to sleep, but it was no good. His mind filled with rousing fantasies of the man that held him.

"In my dreams," he whispered to himself.

"What dreams?"

"Oh, I thought you were asleep. Sorry for waking you."

"S'okay. It's still dark though. Let's sleep some more," he said, pulling Nathan closer against his body.

"Thanks for keeping me warm," Nathan said.

"No problem, l'il buddy. You were shivering in your sleep."

Nathan closed his eyes and tried his best to quiet his mind, but the few hours before daybreak seemed to last an eternity.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Once the sun finally came creeping along the stone wall, Nathan turned his body to face Brohm and poked at him softly to wake him.

"Just another hour, please?" Brohm whined.

"We should get moving."

"Yuh, I know. Did you sleep okay?"

"With you keeping me warm? Yes and no."

Brohm gave him a look. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Nathan laughed. "I greatly appreciated it, and we'll leave it at that."

After breakfast and packing up, they continued their way on the path. It was more of the same for most of the day. As luck had it, they came upon a narrow stream, water trickling its way down from one of the mountains. Both men were happy to refill their waterskins, given they only had one left that was full.

Nearing evening, on one side of the path, they came upon high ridges containing layers of multi-colour sediment. Some vegetation, mostly hardgrass, sprouted in patches, and windblown trees grew where they could. Rounding a bend, the large mouth of a cave in the ridge wall came into view.

"Think you'll be okay to spend the night in there?" Nathan asked.

The big man eyed the black maw with apprehension. "I guess so."

"You take care of the horses, and I'll check it out."

The floor slanted downward, and daylight quickly diminished as he descended. Allowing his eyes to adjust, he explored deeper, hugging the side of one wall, listening for the scrape and shuffle of animals.

"Nathan? Is it safe?" Brohm's voice boomed and echoed across the faceted walls.

Nathan jumped in fright, and then listened again for animals. If there were any, they would surely be stirring now. He glanced back to find Brohm's large frame silhouetted against the sky.

"Seems to be," Nathan said. "Come on down."

Brohm, feet planted, peered into the darkness. "I can't see you."

Nathan climbed up and took Brohm's hand, leading him into the dark. "Let's find a place where the floor isn't too rocky. My back's still killing me from last night."

Brohm's breathing quickened as they delved deeper, his grip crushing Nathan's fingers together.

"Ouch," Nathan said, letting go of his hand. "Slow deep breaths, big guy."

Brohm did so, and then nodded to continue. After twenty metres of slow shuffling along the side of the wall, the ground tapered flat.

"This should do well enough," Nathan said. "We should get some wood from the trees back on the path."

"I'll take care of it," Brohm said quickly, spinning on a heel and scrambling to the exit.

Nathan couldn't help but laugh.

He struck camp while Brohm made three trips, carrying branches and logs chopped from a downed tree. The fire brought much needed warmth to the cave, and the light revealed that the cavern narrowed and continued deeper. Once Brohm's uneasiness subsided, they sat next to each other on a blanket, watching the fire.

"I'm proud of you, Brohm," Nathan said, chewing a piece of tough jerky.

"Why?"

"Because a week earlier, there'd be no chance you'd be down here

willingly. You've come a long way in a short time."

Brohm scratched the back of his head. "It's a stupid fear. I reckon the sooner I get over it, the better."

Nathan nodded.

"And, uh . . . thanks," Brohm mumbled.

Nathan leaned against him, shoulder to shoulder. They continued to eat in silence, watching shadows dance off the craggy surroundings. Nathan attempted a sidelong glance, yet found himself caught in the act. Brohm's piercing eyes held his gaze, and he found himself breathless again. The sharp shadows accentuated the hard features of his face, and to Nathan, he was simply perfect.

"What're you thinking about?" Brohm asked.

Nathan broke the gaze and looked away, feeling his face flush. "I figure it's obvious."

Brohm chuckled quietly. "Yuh, I guess it is."

"I just . . . can't help it. I'm sorry."

"Don't be. Nobody's ever felt the way you do about me. It's kinda nice."

"For a long time, I always thought I'd never need anyone, but I realize now I've been a fool. I denied myself, and been miserable because of it."

Brohm listened silently, allowing him to continue.

"What I'm trying to say is that I've never met anyone like you before. When you smile, my heart races. When we're close, I feel impervious to the troubles the world brings us."

Nathan allowed himself a long breath. "As much as I try, there's no way I can deny that I love you, Brohm." He couldn't remember ever feeling so vulnerable at that moment, and watched the big man's face with intent.

At last, he spoke. "I care a lot for you, Nathan. But I dunno if I could say I feel the same way."

"Sorry. I didn't mean to—"

"Wait, I'm not done. Maybe I *do* love you. I just don't know."

"I'm begging you. Tell me what's going on in that head of yours!"

Brohm let out an exasperated sigh. "I like what's going on between us, but at the same time, it scares me something awful. I've only ever been with women, but they never really interested me. All the other guys would just talk on and on about girls, but I couldn't see what was so good about them.

"Meanwhile, all I *could* think about was my squadmate, Tucker. But there was no way I was gonna act on that. The guys would've killed me."

He took a deep breath and wiped his eyes before continuing. "You're the first person I've ever told what I really wanted. Gods. If pa had found out . . ."

"Who cares if he did? So you happen to enjoy the company of men. Whose business is that but your own?"

"But it's wrong, isn't it?"

"Lots of folk would have you believe that nonsense," Nathan scoffed. "Aside from one small detail, we're no different than anyone else."

Nathan allowed him to digest the information. He felt awful for pushing the subject and putting him in such a state. Nevertheless, he was apologetically and selfishly happy to understand what was going on between them.

"I won't lie. It feels good being with you," Brohm said. "But let's just take this slow, yuh?"

"Your friendship means too much to me. I wouldn't risk it by doing something you wouldn't want."

Brohm glanced back through wet eyes. "You're a good friend," he said, pulling him into a crushing hug, releasing the tension Nathan felt between

them.

They spoke quietly for another hour before settling down to sleep. Brohm coaxed him to lie on his side, covered him with a blanket, and snuggled up as the night before.

"You warm?" he asked in his ear.

With the fire at his front, and Brohm's warm body at his back, the cold air had no way to reach him. If Brohm was using it as an excuse to be close, Nathan didn't care. He enjoyed it all the same.

"I am now," he replied, a smile on his face.

* * *

Nathan woke some time during the night. The fire had died down, and in the dim light, the cave seemed different. More expansive, oppressive. It was then he realized the blanket was cold, and found himself alone.

"Brohm?" he called out, peering about.

There was no answer, however Nathan assumed he was simply relieving himself. He placed another log on the fire, stopping short as a man's voice called out, distant and unclear. He held still and strained his ears, yet heard nothing more. Blaming his imagination, he tucked himself under the blanket, waiting for Brohm's warm embrace.

The voice spoke again, and he knew without a doubt that it came from deeper within the cavern. He grabbed his dagger and padded over to the entrance of the dark passageway. Firelight did little to penetrate far in, but the walls glistened with moisture, helping to reveal the way. After a few steps in, he listened again. The voice was closer, and while he still couldn't make out the details, one word stood out. *Stream.*

Several metres farther, the passage veered to the right. He peered into the black, astonished to see faint flickering light coming from deeper within.

"Can you see a way across?" echoed toward him.

It sounded like Brohm, and he called his name, but no reply came. With careful steps, he headed toward the mysterious firelight.

"Okay, I'll go first to make sure it's safe," Brohm's voice continued.

The passageway split into two, and he continued left toward the light. It grew in brightness gradually, allowing him to scout ahead with more confidence.

"Okay, your turn. But be careful. That one rock is really slippery," Brohm's voice said, very close now.

"Brohm!" he yelled out.

Still no reply.

The path split again, but the flickering firelight emerged from both directions, and he was puzzled which route to take.

"What are you talking about? If you know you're going to slip, you can be prepared for it. Just be careful."

Nathan sprinted left toward the sound of Brohm's voice. The light source originated from a cavern ahead, and he could hear water flowing.

"Careful. Nathan!"

He skidded to a stop at Brohm's warning, and then heard a sudden splash. The firelight went out. All was pitch black.

"Brohm!" he cried. "Damn it, answer me!"

All he could hear was the rush of water at the end of the corridor, and his own ragged breathing as he slipped into panic. Feeling his way along the slimy wall, he carefully stepped back the way he came, yet found himself at a

dead end. Unbelieving, he stumbled back along the opposite wall, yet it led him to the same cavernous room with flowing water. Unable to find a way out and overwhelmed by fear, Nathan collapsed to his knees.

"You're so close."

Now another voice filled his ears. It oozed menace, and Nathan instantly recognized the source. It was the daemonic face he saw at the farmhouse. He cringed as warm breath crept along the back of his neck, and two clawed hands grabbed his shoulders, digging into his flesh, holding him down. Nathan dropped his dagger, gasping in pain.

"You're so close, I can taste you, and I'm so very hungry," the hellish voice continued in his ear.

Burning red eyes floated into view, emitting enough light to expose the face he dreaded. Thick lips pulled back to reveal a slimy tongue snaking its way across jagged teeth, and Nathan choked, on the verge of being sick as it licked his face. Satisfied by his reaction, the beast shoved the thick tongue into his open gagging mouth, and wrapped its lips around his in a grotesque kiss.

Nathan tried to pull away, but the daemon held a firm grip. The disgust was too much to take and he vomited into the beast's mouth. It moaned ecstatically, relishing the act. Nathan's body suddenly went limp, as though the kiss stole from his lifeforce, and fighting back seemed impossible. The beast gently lay him down on his back. Cold and paralysed, Nathan stared wide-eyed as the daemon hunched over his naked frame, its genitalia sitting heavy on his chest.

"Try to enjoy this," the daemon whispered.

Nathan cried out in hysterical, all-encompassing terror as the beast leaned forward, forcing its phallus into his open mouth.

* * *

Brohm shook Nathan awake.

He gasped and coughed, reeling about in the dim glow of the fire, now only embers. Sullen morning light emerging from the cave's exit did nothing to illuminate their camp. Remnants of the putrid taste lingering in his mouth caused him to heave. Brohm held him close, his face creased with concern.

"What's wrong?"

Nathan managed to catch his breath, and peered deeper into the cave. "Just . . . just a nightmare."

"Again? Come on, let's get outta here."

They packed up quickly and climbed out of the cave to find a dusting of snow covering the ground. The stark contrast between the virgin snow and dark wet stone lent an air of desolation. A leaden sky completed the scene, complimenting Nathan's mood perfectly.

The path widened, allowing them to ride next to each other, yet they travelled in silence for most of the morning. Finally, Brohm asked the question Nathan knew was coming.

"So, what was the nightmare about?"

"It was awful. I was trying to find you, but got lost in the dark."

Nathan decided to keep the worst part of the dream to himself.

"They're just dreams though," Brohm said.

"I'm telling you, this is different. They don't drift away like forgotten memories."

"It's nothing to be afraid of once you're awake."

"That's what I'm trying to say. These don't seem like dreams. They feel too

real."

Brohm briefly looked over to Nathan. "C'mon l'il buddy. Just try to forget about it."

Despite Nathan's best efforts, the nightmare kept repeating in his head.

Grey skies continued unabated, and the light flurries became a cold drizzle by evening. Brohm's few attempts to lift his spirits did nothing to clear Nathan's dark mood. They set up camp under a small overhang, sitting with their backs against the wall. Without a word, Brohm pulled him close, wrapping an arm around his shoulder. The simple gesture helped to soothe his mind, allowing him to close his eyes without fear of his dreams.

The next morning brought a thick fog, slowing their progress, but it soon melted away to reveal blue skies. A crisp breeze blew at their back, and the oppression he felt dissipated with it, lightening the mood between the two men.

By early afternoon, they crested the final rise. Beyond held a majestic view of a wide, green valley that Nathan judged to be at least a kilometre down from their location. The vale cut its way west, veering north farther out, with colossal mountains lining both sides. A river, sparkling blue in the sunlight, snaked its way through the greenery.

"Beauty, yuh?" Brohm said in wonder.

Nathan nodded, taking it all in. After nearly a week of grey rock, the sudden colour seared his eyes, yet he found it impossible to look away. The trail lazily switchbacked down the side of the mountain. Once halfway down, they came upon a great cascading waterfall that fed the river below. The water crashed its way across many ledges, with a particular shelf large enough to step onto safely.

Nathan dismounted and called back to Brohm. "Want to take a shower?"

"You know that water is going to be just above freezing, yuh?"

Nathan nodded with a sly grin, and stripped to his loincloth while Brohm looked on.

"You coming?"

The big man laughed and proceeded to do the same. The fine spray alone gave Nathan a shiver, and as he dipped a foot into the water, a shriek escaped him, astounded at how ludicrously cold it was. He turned to glance back at Brohm, and nearly lost his footing at the sight he beheld. The big man lumbered toward him, completely naked, his manhood swinging like a mesmerizing pendulum. Nathan averted his eyes in a lame attempt not to blatantly stare, but found himself unable to wipe the ridiculous grin off his face.

"If you want to do it right, off with this," Brohm said, pulling at the cloth around Nathan's waist.

Once again, Nathan found himself aroused by his forward nature. He did as Brohm suggested, and stepped into the falling water, immediately regretting it. The cold was so intense it burned his skin. Meanwhile, Brohm seemed unfazed and happily scrubbed his face and body. Nathan did the same with numb hands, but could only last a minute before needing to escape the frigid water.

"What? You done already?" Brohm teased, slapping his behind roughly as he passed.

Nathan jumped in surprise and laughed, nearly slipping on the wet rock. He donned his loincloth, and padded to a large, inclining rock nearby. The warm sun beaming down made it hot to the touch, but laying on it helped to regain his strength lost from the biting cold. With eyes closed, he listened to

Brohm's heavy gait, water dripping from his frame. With a grunt, he lay beside Nathan to dry off.

"That was nice, yuh?"

"Mmhmm," Nathan assented, eyes still closed.

Once Brohm was settled, Nathan peeked with one eye to find him reclining, hands behind his head and one foot planted to hold himself in place. He ogled his thick form, powerful muscle rippling under the surface. The urge to roll on top of him was nearly overpowering, but he held back, telling himself Brohm would be the one to initiate anything that would happen between them. After that dam broke, the big man would just have to deal with Nathan's torrent of lust. Lost in his fantasy, he hadn't notice Brohm catching him in the act of staring, again.

"Enjoying the view?" he asked, chuckling.

By the time they reached the valley floor, the sun was nearing the top of the western mountains, drawing massive jagged shadows in their wake. Using the light they had left, they decided to push their horses to a gallop. The flat terrain allowed them that luxury, something they couldn't do safely while traversing the mountain range.

That evening, they set up camp in a copse of trees surrounded by thick grass swaying in the mountain breeze. Wood was collected, and Brohm soon had a roaring fire built while Nathan cared for the horses. They sat together and ate, their backs against a large oak.

"What I wouldn't give for some real food," Brohm grumbled as he tore a chunk of tough jerky with his teeth.

Nathan patted his leg in consolation. "Any idea how much farther we have to go?"

"I reckon another couple of days at the rate we were riding this evening. Once we hit the main road, there should be an inn we can visit on the way to Morringstone."

"I don't think that's a good idea, big guy."

"But my back is killing me. I miss sleeping in a bed."

Nathan sighed. "So do I, but it's a big risk. The less we're seen, the better."

Brohm pouted, tearing off another chunk of jerky while Nathan lay back to gaze up at the stars peeking through the canopy of leaves. A gentle breeze passed through, bringing with it a familiar smell.

Jasmine.

The dream of the meadow flashed in his mind's eye. Even now, he could hear the distant rush of the narrow river fed by the mountain waterfall. He sat up suddenly, catching Brohm by surprise.

"Everything alright?"

Nathan scratched his head, peering around. Even in the dark, he could tell this wasn't the place from his dream. He felt crazy to even consider it should've been. "Yeah, I just remembered a dream I had."

"Another nightmare?"

"Not quite. You were in it though."

"Yuh? What was I doing?"

"You saved me, bringing me to a meadow similar to this."

Brohm grinned. "Sounds like an okay dream to me."

"I'll take first watch. I'm not very tired," Nathan said.

"That's good, 'cause I am."

While it was much warmer than nights past, the chill from the mountains still seeped down into the valley. Pulling up his hood, he wandered away from the copse and into the grass. The jasmine breeze returned, filling him with a

sense of longing, melancholy. Everything seemed so right in his dream, and it was something he desperately wanted now in his waking life.

He glanced back at the copse, the firelight flickering from within. While he couldn't see Brohm, knowing he was there filled him with a trace of comfort. A smile crossed his face, bringing with it hesitant hope for the future.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

With the end of their long journey in sight, both men were eager to get moving and departed well before sunrise. As daybreak arrived, the gorgeous weather returned, with fluffy little clouds floating lazily in the blue sky. The path continued to go easy on the horses, allowing them to push hard and fast.

While riding through a lightly wooded area, Brohm abruptly signalled to stop. Without looking back, the big man practically jumped off his horse, and forced Nathan to dodge off the path and duck under a low branch aimed for his head.

Dismounting and assuming the worst, he pulled a dagger and made his way toward Brohm who'd dashed into the trees. He found him not too far in, gazing around with a grin on his face.

"Brohm, what is it?"

"Apples!" he said, pointing at the trees.

He was right. They were surrounded by an apple orchard growing in the wild.

"Gods, I thought it was something serious. I damn near killed myself dodging your horse," Nathan said, sheathing his dagger.

Brohm looked back at him sheepishly after picking two apples. "Sorry, I didn't mean to scare you," he said, tossing one to Nathan. "I'm just hungry for something different than jerky and bread, yuh?"

Brohm took a large bite, juices flowing down his chin, but after chewing once, he puckered his lips.

"A little sour?" Nathan asked with a grin.

Brohm nodded, wiping the juice from his chin. "Still good though," he said with a mouthful.

They decided to stop for an early lunch, enjoying the new addition to their menu. After gathering as much as they could into bags, they continued west.

The hours passed, and Nathan found the mountains began pulling away, widening the valley. The narrow river they'd been travelling alongside also expanded, flowing away from the path. Toward their destination on the northwest horizon, dark clouds filled the valley. Oddly, as they approached them, the looming clouds seemed trapped, unmoving. Slowly, the ground underfoot changed from dense tundra to marshland. What few trees remained were dead, mostly fallen, and the smell of damp rot assailed his nose. The path soon became lost, forcing them to stop and survey the area.

"This wasn't here when I was a kid," Brohm said.

Nathan felt a tinge of annoyance.

"I was sure this path continued north until we hit the main road," Brohm continued. "I reckon we took a wrong turn?"

"I don't think so. These mountains set our way. Was there a hidden pass on the northern side of the valley?"

"No, I don't remember anything like that."

Nathan dismounted. "Come on, we just need to keep heading north. We'll hit the road sooner or later."

Brohm did the same, scouting the best route and leading their horses deeper into the swamp.

* * *

A fog settled onto the wetland as evening approached. The cloying dampness chilled Nathan to the bone, throwing him into a foul mood.

"Keep your eyes open for some place dry," he called out.

"What do you think I'm doing?" Brohm yelled back.

Slogging their way through the muck, they spotted a large tree hiding in the mist, black and leafless. It stood on elevated ground, and the loam around it was only moist, not soggy like the rest of the swamp, so they decided to set up camp. Despite the bounty of wood in their surroundings, all was wet and rotten.

Nathan sighed. "No fire tonight."

"Obviously."

He gave the big man an icy glare, not appreciating his sarcastic tone. In return, Brohm rolled his eyes. Nathan stormed off toward the horses to retrieve his woollen clothes, donning them in an attempt to stave off the damp, but it did little to help. Gingerly removing his muddy boots, he lay down on layered blankets, facing away from Brohm, and covered himself with the last one.

"Not gonna eat?"

"I'm not hungry," Nathan muttered.

"Fine."

A burning anger filled his chest that he couldn't explain. It felt good to give in to it, so he did, allowing his mind to fill with dark thoughts as he dozed off.

Throughout the night, he woke to recall bizarre images of violence. He stood among the ranks of men-at-arms, fighting alongside them in a brutal pitched battle, relishing the glorious triumph of sinking a blade into his foe. However, at the same time he experienced that attack firsthand, writhing in agony as the blade pierced his flesh.

His final memory was laying face down in the dirt, lifeblood seeping from his wounds, surrounded by his dying comrades and their enemy. The ring of battle was distant, overpowered by the groans of the men around him.

He woke, and the din of the swamp filled his ears. Unseen bugs clicked and buzzed, interspersed with the odd bird call. The fog had grown thicker, and he was unable to see beyond a couple of metres. He turned to find Brohm lying nearby with his back toward him. Anger welled up in his chest again, bringing with it a hatred toward the man he couldn't explain, but it was clearly there. He just wanted to be away from him.

"Get up!" he grumbled, shoving Brohm awake. "Let's get out of this damn swamp."

The big man snorted and lifted his head up to look back at him, murder written on his face. Nathan flinched back in fear, his mind suddenly clear as though waking from a dream. The anger was gone for the briefest moment, replaced by the aching love he had for him. But it was smothered by hatred and loathing so quickly that Nathan was empathetic to the short-lived flash of affection.

He still wasn't hungry, but knew he had to eat. Taking a bite of bread was like torture, and he retched at the thought of swallowing it. Rather die than take another bite, he left Brohm to eat on his own.

Neither man spoke as they continued their trek through the swamp. Instead, they exchanged glances of malice and contempt. As the day wore on, those feelings intensified, and Nathan fantasized sinking his dagger into Brohm's back.

The thick fog remained, and the boggy landscape seemed endless. It was impossible to travel in a straight line, and having to dodge murky pools of sludge water slowed their progress even more. Nathan's legs ached from trudging through the mud, and he felt light-headed. The thought of eating still

made his stomach turn, but deep in the back of his mind, he knew he'd have to eat soon. In the distance, he saw something that filled him with rage. It was the tree. The same tree they camped at the night before.

"You've gotta be *kidding* me?" Nathan cried.

Only then did Brohm notice what Nathan was complaining about. "What do you expect? I can't see a metre in front of my nose," he yelled back, waving his arms in the air.

"I expect the guy who's leading us through this gods-damned swamp not to run us around in circles all day."

"I've done fine up 'til now!"

"A child could've led us through the pass up to this point. It's been a single path through the mountains," Nathan said, stomping through the mud to stand up to Brohm.

"I don't know why the *fuck* I ever decided to stick together with you," Brohm said. "My life is over, and we'll be hunted until the day we die."

"That might be sooner than you think," Nathan said under his breath.

"Empty threats . . ."

Nathan had heard enough. Despite the height difference, he managed a solid punch across the big man's jaw, yet he remained standing, unfazed.

"I've been waiting all day for this," Brohm said through gritted teeth.

Fear unclouded Nathan's mind again. Before him was a man intent on killing him, and he raised his hands up in pleading. "No, wait. Brohm!"

A hefty uppercut sent him sprawling into the air. Stars filled his vision and he felt weightless for a moment until finally landing in the mud. Regaining his senses, he found Brohm looming over him with the same deadly intent in his eyes. The same unnerving smile.

Nathan tried to backpedal through the muck, but Brohm lumbered over his prone body and sat on his chest to hold him down, the impact knocking his breath out. A meaty fist smashed across his face, forcing his head deeper into the mud.

"Die!" Brohm spat, wrapping his fingers around Nathan's neck.

He tried to pry them away, but the grip was steel. "P-lease . . . Brohm, please," he gasped, his sight narrowing and growing dark.

A tear ran down his cheek in despair, not knowing how to get through to his friend. His last friend. The grip around his throat tightened as Brohm re-doubled his efforts. Energy spent, he felt everything go numb. A figure in white robes appeared behind the big man. Nathan found it difficult to focus and thought it must've been an angel to take him. He found it curious to know that there was indeed something after death.

"Boys! Enough fighting now. Someone's going to get hurt."

Nathan blinked in confusion. The voice didn't sound heavenly in the least. It was more like that of an old woman. Suddenly the pressure around his neck was gone, and he heard a strange low wailing. There were words, yet he found himself unable to decipher them. He knew he was forgetting to do something important, but couldn't pinpoint what it was. His body jostled as though someone was trying to rouse him from sleep. The words continued forceful and unabated, and finally one word came through that made sense.

"*Breathe!*"

Nathan gasped for air, coughing and wheezing, and found Brohm kneeling beside him. His face filled his vision, tears streaming down his cheek and mouth agape, sobbing like a baby. "I'm so sorry, so sorry," he blubbered.

The old woman's voice rose above Brohm's wailing. "Dry your tears and wipe that nose, you big ox. Your friend will be fine."

Nathan turned to look back at the mysterious woman. She wore a long silken white dress that, despite being in the middle of a bog, remained perfectly pristine. Her face was radiant, young. Painfully beautiful.

An attempt to lift himself up resulted in an embarrassing faceplant into the mud, only then realizing he had no strength left to perform such a simple task. Brohm pulled him into his arms and held on tightly, continuing to weep.

"Come with me. You both need rest," the woman said. "And stop that infernal racket."

"B-but . . . where are we going?" Brohm managed to ask through racking sobs.

The woman glided toward the horses, taking their reins. The dress was long enough that her feet remained unseen, but her graceful movement seemed impossible given the terrain. She gestured toward the fog, and it melted away to reveal a small cottage nestled in towering evergreens.

"My humble abode, of course."

Nathan blinked in disbelief, finding it inconceivable the small house had been hiding the entire time, yet there it stood. A gentle, warm light emanated from small windows and smoke rose from the chimney. After everything they'd been through, it was a welcome sight.

Brohm managed to compose himself, stood up, and carried Nathan in his arms. Still sapped of strength, Nathan tried his best to stop his head from lolling back and forth while Brohm slogged through the mud. Upon reaching the line of evergreens, the stink of the fetid swamp vanished, replaced by soothing exotic incense.

"Look at the two of you," the woman chided. "Like naughty children. This won't do at all."

Brohm stopped to glance down at Nathan and himself. They were covered in mud.

"Not to worry," she continued, tying the horses to a nearby hitching post. Gliding over and raising a hand, she snapped a finger, and then nodded in approval. The mud vanished, leaving them spotlessly clean.

"Much better," she said, stepping toward the entrance.

"Magick?" Brohm asked in astonishment.

She tilted her head just enough to offer a wink and subtle smile. They stepped inside, welcomed by the warmth from the hearth and the aroma of stew bubbling in a pot.

"I'm afraid I'm not prepared for guests. All I can offer you is the floor to rest on," she said, gesturing to a rug near the hearth.

"That's okay," Brohm said, laying Nathan down and settling himself beside him.

"Thank you for your help," Nathan managed.

"I can't remember the last time I saw travellers coming this way. Good reason too," she said, sitting in a small chair nearby. "That curse got the best of you two."

Brohm whipped his head in her direction. "What?"

"I suppose you don't know about the curse of Knavesmire Bog? Nobody in their right mind would come through here willingly."

Brohm shrugged. "I travelled this pass with my pa when I was a kid, but I don't remember this place."

"Ah, that's a good thing. If your father knew best, he would've taken the other route."

"There's another way?"

"Well, not anymore. A landslide made the northern pass impossible to

cross."

"But what about this curse?"

"You experienced it firsthand just now. Hatred of all things."

The big man glanced down at Nathan with sad eyes, and swallowed hard. "Oh . . . right."

"A vicious battle ended on these grounds and many men died. It's not known why it happened, but this bog held the anger and death of those men. If you roam here too long, death will find you as well."

"But you live here? How're you not affected?" Brohm asked.

She laughed again and gave him a passive wave. "You think a little curse could harm me? Silly ox."

"My name's Brohm, and this is Nathan."

"Brohm the ox? It fits."

Despite his weariness, Nathan couldn't help but chuckle. Brohm didn't seem to appreciate the title.

"Oh, come now. I'm just teasing," she said.

"May we ask your name?" Nathan enquired.

"Of course you may. My name is Morgana." She stood up and glided over to the pot bubbling in the hearth. "Now, enough talk. You should eat and rest. Regain your strength."

At the mention of food, Nathan realized he was ravenous.

"That stew does smell awful good," Brohm said.

Morgana served them a healthy portion in large wooden bowls, and both men ate as quickly as possible without being rude. She ate her own fill at a tiny table nearby, apologizing again for having them sit on the floor, but neither man cared. They were warm, clean, and their bellies were full with something else besides hardbread and jerky. Upon finishing, Morgana gathered their bowls and went to wash them.

"Let me do that," Brohm insisted, standing up. "It's the least I can do for helping us."

"Absolutely not," she said. "You're my guests. Sit down."

Brohm stood sheepishly a moment, but then did as she requested. While cleaning, she began humming a happy tune, her voice wavering during the longer notes.

"Uhm, Morgana?" Brohm called out.

"Yes, dear."

"I was wondering something. It's, uhh . . . I don't reckon I know how to say this."

Finished her task, she glided back to the two men lounging on the rug, staring Brohm down with a sly grin. "Spit it out then. You're full of questions. Don't stop now."

"Well, you're very beautiful, but—"

"Flattery will get you everywhere, my big ox."

Brohm offered a nervous laugh before continuing. "But you're voice sounds like you could be my grandma."

He was right. Her voice didn't match her appearance. Regardless, Nathan swatted his arm for saying something so inappropriate. But much to their surprise, Morgana found his comment hilarious, laughing out loud and sounding very much like someone's grandmother.

"You're very blunt," she said. "I like that."

Brohm's face was beet red and he avoided her gaze, clearly regretting his statement.

"I suppose I can reveal a little secret. I've lived well over one hundred years.

This," she gestured to her face and body, "is indeed a façade. A trick of magick."

In a blink of an eye, her appearance changed. Wrinkles and liver spots replaced soft, smooth skin. The immaculate dress became a threadbare linen smock with a simple belt. Both men jumped in surprise at the sudden change.

"That's the only problem with the spell," she continued. "If there's any mention of it to someone who doesn't know of its existence, it'll break. However nothing stops me from casting the spell again."

She snapped a finger. Nothing happened.

"Uhm . . ." Brohm uttered.

"Oh, of course," she tittered. "To be in the vicinity of casting the spell makes you immune to its magick, however it does still work."

Stepping over to a looking glass, her reflection revealed she was indeed young and beautiful again. "It's all very complicated, but there's no need to understand how it works. You can see the results yourself."

Brohm seemed genuinely interested, yet confused and at a loss for words. Meanwhile, Nathan found it difficult to keep his eyes open. She crouched down beside him.

"I think the poor dear has had enough for one day."

Brohm looked down at Nathan, noticing the bruises around his neck for the first time. "I can't believe I did that to you," he said morosely.

"Don't fret, my big ox. He'll be fine."

She touched Nathan's forehead with the back of her hand, but quickly pulled away.

"What's wrong? Does he have a fever?" Brohm asked, touching Nathan's forehead. "He doesn't feel hot."

"No, not a fever." She gave Nathan a stern look. "Tell me, have you been in contact with any magickal artifacts?"

Nathan was perplexed. "Artifacts? No—"

"What about that alchemist," Brohm said. "You mentioned something about magick."

"The ring. Of course!" Nathan said.

"Where did this ring come from?" she demanded.

"An alchemist created it, allowing him to see my actions from afar."

"That would explain it then," she said, nodding.

"Explain what?"

She tentatively touched Nathan again. "You're holding the remnants of its magick. It must've seeped into your being while you wore it. It's a sign of shoddy workmanship. Amateurs."

"Does that mean they can still watch me?" Nathan tried to rise, but Morgana laid a hand on his chest.

"While it's possible, it's very unlikely, dear. There wouldn't be much energy to latch onto, so they'd need to be close."

"I don't reckon anyone's going to find us here, yuh?" Brohm said.

Morgana nodded. "It can cause strange side-effects though, such as strangely persistent dreams."

"Maybe that explains why you've been having so many bad dreams," Brohm said.

"You've been plagued by nightmares?"

Nathan nodded. "I rather not talk about them."

"If the spelled ring was farsight, your dreams could be offering you a window to another place in another time."

Nathan thought back, and shivered at the memory of Brohm's torture, and

the daemon in the dark.

"How can I tell if the dreams were just that: dreams?"

Morgana shook her head. "I'm sorry, my dear. But you should know that what you see isn't set in stone. It's just one possible future. The residue will disappear over time, so don't fret about that."

Nathan covered his face with his hands, letting out an exasperated sigh. "There's only so much bad news I can take right now."

"I'll leave you two. Try to rest now." She rose to her feet and stepped into a far room, closing the door behind her.

Brohm, still sitting beside Nathan, put a comforting hand on his shoulder. "It'll be okay. We've made it this far, and we'll reach Morringstone in a few days."

"The tankard's always half-full with you, isn't it?"

Brohm's hand moved to Nathan's neck, gently touching the bruises. "I'm so sorry," he whispered.

Nathan took his hand and pulled him down to lie beside him. "It wasn't your fault. I was the idiot who started the fight, remember?"

The big man pulled him closer, embracing him, and without warning kissed him on the lips. It was brief and innocent, but in doing so, Nathan couldn't hold back any longer. Moving in, he kissed him again, holding onto the moment. Brohm climbed atop him, slipping his tongue between his lips, stealing his breath. Nathan allowed himself to give in to his lust, heightening the spark between them, and a groan escaped him.

Brohm broke the bond and pulled back. "Shhh. She'll hear us," he said, glancing toward the closed door. "I reckon this isn't the right place to do this. Maybe we should stop."

"No, no, don't do this to me," Nathan pleaded, panting.

"Come on, we're guests here. Did you really expect to whip it out and make a mess on the rug?"

As much as he wanted to do exactly that, he knew Brohm was right.

"Another time, another place, l'il buddy."

"It better be soon," Nathan said. "I can't take much more of this."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Unable to take his mind off Brohm, the night passed slowly. He managed to sleep in the early morning hours, yet upon waking, found himself alone. Outside, Brohm and Morgana spoke quietly. He stretched his weary body and stepped out to find them sitting on a bench against the cottage.

"Good morning," Morgana said. "Did you sleep well?"

"I've slept better," Nathan said, offering Brohm a knowing look.

The big man tried to hide a smirk.

"Oh, I'm sorry to hear that, dear," she said, gesturing for Nathan to sit across from them on another bench. "I must say, your ox here is smarter than he looks."

Brohm frowned. "Hey!"

"Oh, calm down," she soothed.

"What are you guys talking about?" Nathan asked.

"I told her about our . . . situation."

"Brohm, I don't know if that's such a good idea—"

"Not to worry, dear," she said. "I'm not about to start judging folk now, after all this time. I'm no saint myself."

"I appreciate that," Nathan said.

"Your friend asked for assistance to aid in your plight. Specifically, to change your appearances, which would allow both of you to be free from your captors."

Nathan let it sink in. It was too simple. "What's the catch?"

"An excellent question. I wouldn't offer my services for free, of course."

"I wouldn't trust it if you did offer freely," Nathan said.

Brohm waved a hand to get her attention. "You never said anything about that."

"You never asked," she said, smiling. "In return for my services, I request that you retrieve an amulet from the ruins of Tornel."

"Wait! Old Tornel Keep? Isn't that place haunted?" Brohm asked.

"Don't be silly."

"I'm not familiar with these ruins," Nathan said. "Where are they located?"

"A few days ride, maybe longer. The road through the forest will likely be grown over. You'll find it North of Morringstone, along the jagged coast."

"Curious. We were heading that way already," Nathan mused. "Do you know where in these ruins we can find the amulet?"

"It's said a natural cave was unearthed during construction of the deeper recesses of the dungeons. Instead of filling it in, they explored and found a labyrinth of passageways.

"The lord used these deep recesses to store untold riches, as well as a collection of magickal artifacts. I've good cause to believe that the amulet I've been searching for is kept in those depths."

Nathan pondered her request. "What does the amulet do?"

"That's for me to know," she said in a serious tone. "It's perfectly safe to hold and carry, if that's your concern. The magick stored within isn't easy to activate."

"And what about this spell to change our appearance. Does it wear off over time, or cause any . . . unpleasant side-effects?"

"It's harmless, and as long as you don't mention it to anyone, it will last until your death, at which time your original appearance will return."

"I appreciate your honesty," Nathan said. "I've never fully trusted magick, and after the troubles caused by that blasted ring, you can understand my want

to steer clear of magickal doings altogether.

"In saying that, I admit this offer is tempting. Brohm, you're okay with going through with this?"

The big man was clearly in the opposite standing when it came to magick. His interest was obvious, and the novelty of changing his appearance excited him like a child. "Yuh, for sure. Besides, it's not like it'd need to be forever. After five or ten years, I reckon we'd be forgotten and could change back if we wanted."

She smiled. "You see? A smart ox."

"Okay then, I guess we'll do it."

The decision was made despite his better judgement, but he reasoned with himself there was little chance of another proposition showing itself. He offered his hand, and she took it firmly, shaking to their agreement. She turned and did the same with Brohm, his large hand comically dwarfing hers.

"How about some breakfast?" she asked, rising and entering the cottage before either man could reply.

Nathan moved to sit beside Brohm. "So you really ready for this, big guy?"

Brohm shrugged. "Sure, why do you ask?"

"We'll be exploring deep caverns. You're alright with that?"

A look of concern crossed his face. "Oh . . . right."

"I'm convinced you'll be okay. You're fine once you get over your initial uneasiness."

"Yuh, I-I guess. I was just thinking about changing our faces. That should be fun."

"One thing at a time. We gotta find that amulet first."

After breakfast, they decided to unpack and reorganize their gear before departing to their new destination. Morgana emerged from her cottage, offering a torch to Brohm.

"Once lit, this torch will last for nearly a fortnight. Something I'm sure you'll find useful in those caves."

"Wow, for sure. Thanks," Brohm said.

Then she turned to Nathan, handing him a small pendant. "This will help you navigate the bog by dissolving fog from the area. Now I know how you feel about magick. There's no need to wear this. It will still work perfectly fine if you store it in your pack."

"Thank you, Morgana. Your hospitality has been very much appreciated," Nathan said. "We hope to return soon enough."

"As do I, my dear," she said with a tender smile.

After saying their goodbyes, the two men mounted up and followed the short path back into the swamp, leaving the evergreens behind. The fetid smell and muggy air hit them hard.

Brohm gagged. "Ugh, I forgot about that."

"At least we can see where we're going now," Nathan said, pointing northeast toward the mountains lining the side of the swamp.

Instead of attempting to navigate the marshy bog, the way north alongside the eastern mountains was rock and broken up gravel, allowing them quicker travel. Despite the knowledge of the curse, both men could feel its tendrils reach into them, its subtle anger and hatred bubbling under the surface. By late afternoon, the narrow way opened to vast grasslands, leaving the mountains, bog, and its curse behind. A refreshing breeze greeted them, and both men took it in deeply, smiling in relief.

"Where's the road to Morringstone?" Nathan asked.

"I reckon if we continue northeast, we'll hit it sooner or later."

The setting sun at their back, their shadows lengthened across the long swaying grass, reaching farther out until the sun sunk beneath the horizon. Once the stars emerged in the darkening sky, they set up camp by flattening out an area in the grass.

"Do you still want to meet your friend in Morringstone before we head on?" Brohm asked.

"I've been mulling that in my head all day," Nathan said, tending to the horses. "I think it's best we skip past Morringstone."

"Oh . . . okay."

"Why do you ask?"

He shrugged. "I'm thirsty for some ale and missing a soft bed to sleep in. Just for one night, yuh?"

"I hear you, big guy. Me too. But travelling through that pass cut us off from the rest of the world. It's been around ten days, and who knows how far word has spread in that time."

"Can we at least peek into town?" Brohm pleaded.

The thought of a tankard in his hand bested Nathan, and he conceded. "Okay, okay fine. We'll head into Morringstone and see my friend there. He should be able to tell us if it's safe or not."

Brohm nodded with a smile on his face.

Nathan held up a finger in warning. "But if it's as bad as I fear, we skip town as soon as he tells us. No tavern, no bed. Like I said before, we can't risk it."

Brohm nodded again, dispirited this time. "Yuh, okay."

Nathan couldn't help but feel guilty to deny him those simple pleasures.

* * *

They rose with the sun, continuing northeast across the countryside. By midmorning, a wide treeline appeared on the eastern horizon with still no road in sight.

"I reckon we should head more north," Brohm called out.

Nathan nodded and signalled to do so. Before long, the well-travelled road came into view.

"We should stay wary of patrols," Nathan said as they manoeuvred their horses out of the long grass up the small ridge to the road.

Urging their mounts to a gallop, they advanced east to be swallowed by the vast deciduous forest. Nathan hadn't travelled the road for many years, but much was as he remembered it. He also recalled it was a fair journey to reach Morringstone.

Thirty metres away, two men appeared from behind a tree, blocking the way and forcing them to stop. Highwaymen. Nathan checked his dagger in its sheath, and made sure his bow and quiver were within reach.

"I'll take care of this," Brohm said.

Dismounting, he made a show of checking his sword in its scabbard, and lumbered toward the two men with purpose. They were a strange duo. One man was tall and well dressed. The other was not unlike an animal, with unkempt jet-black hair, and a bushy beard hiding most of his face. Neither man brandished a weapon, but that didn't mean they were unarmed.

"Ho there," the tall man called out to Brohm.

The tone was friendly, however his face told their true intentions. Upon reaching them, Brohm spoke to the tall man while the other watched Nathan suspiciously. Then much to Nathan's surprise, Brohm laughed. It was a good-

hearted chuckle, and tall man joined in as well.

"It's fine," Brohm called out. "I know these two idiots."

Nathan dismounted and jogged the short distance toward the group.

"Nathan, meet Wellor and Rypan," Brohm said.

Wellor, the tall man with a thin moustache nodded his hello. Rypan, still mistrustful, continued to stare at him with fierce eyes, mirroring Nathan's observation of the men.

"You guys know each other?" Nathan asked.

"Yuh, we've met a bunch of times on jobs," Brohm said.

"Alas, no jobs to be had right now. So we've had to rely on an old standby," Wellor said.

He oozed charm, and his cadence was rehearsed, like that of a swindler. Nathan couldn't decide if his manner was fake or not.

"Obviously, you two may pass unmolested," he continued.

"I appreciate that," Nathan said sourly, already tired of hearing him speak.

"Okay guys, we've got a long road ahead of us," Brohm said. "We'll have to catch up another time, yuh?"

"Oh? Where are you headed?" Wellor asked.

Brohm glanced over at Nathan, unsure what to say.

"It's best you don't know," Nathan suggested.

Wellor pulled a scroll from his belt and offered it. "Does it have anything to do with this?"

Nathan pulled it open to reveal a frightening detailed likeness of Brohm and his own face. A wanted poster.

"Take a look at the bottom," Wellor said. "That's quite a sum they're offering."

Nathan did his best to hide his reaction.

"May I ask what you did to be worth so much coin?" Wellor asked.

"No," Nathan said curtly, handing the scroll back. "C'mon Brohm. Let's go."

The big man, white as a sheet, silently followed Nathan back to their horses.

"You know," Wellor drawled. "It's a good thing Brohm is a friend of ours. Otherwise we would've had you all tied up by now."

It was a thinly veiled threat that Nathan ignored. He grabbed the reins and mounted up. Brohm followed suit.

"Many others have seen this poster. They're all over town. I'd be careful if I were you."

"Thanks for the warning," Nathan said.

Smugness painted Wellor's face as they charged past. Nathan glanced back to see them rushing off the road, likely running for their horses hidden in the brush.

"Brohm, how well do you trust those guys?"

"I reckon as far as I can throw them."

"I think they're planning on selling us out."

"Yuh, no doubt," Brohm said with finality.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

If Wellor and Rypan were tailing them, they were doing an excellent job. Nathan never caught sight of them once.

Well before dark, they decided to stop for the day, and ventured deep into the forest to search for a safe place to camp. Brohm, sullen after the discovery of the wanted poster, tugged at the reins impatiently as they led their mounts south off the road.

A hundred metres into the brush, they discovered a weather-worn mossy rock. It was gigantic, nearly the size of a one-storey house, and seemed out of place in its surroundings. They approached it, finding the far side sheared off, creating a sudden drop from the top. It allowed them a little shelter, and hid them from the road. Nathan smiled in spite of their situation.

The thick forest grew dark while Nathan tended to the horses. Insect chirps and whines replaced songbird. Meanwhile, Brohm rummaged through one of the bags, and then sighed, breaking his hours of silence.

"I know you don't want to go into Morringstone—hells, even I don't want to now—but we might have no choice."

Nathan finished his work and joined him. "Why?"

"We've got two or three days left of supplies," he said, showing the mostly empty saddlebag.

"Isn't there another bag left?"

"I thought so too, but I've check twice. This is the last one."

Nathan cursed under his breath.

"Yuh, my thoughts exactly," Brohm mumbled, bringing the dwindling food supply to their camp.

Nathan started an adequate fire to provide warmth, yet small enough not to illuminate the canopy above to give away their location.

"Okay," he said, thinking out loud. "Maybe once we get to Morringstone, we'll wait until dark, meet up with my friend, ask him to get some supplies, and then we head out before sunrise."

"What's this guy's name anyway? You never told me," Brohm said.

"Haven't I? It's Nyle."

"I reckon he's gonna know what's going on. You mentioned you didn't trust him. Are you sure this is a good idea?"

He was correct. Nathan didn't trust Nyle. And it was likely he'd use this request as a favour in the future. A big one.

"I don't see much choice."

Brohm rubbed his bald head in frustration. "You know, part of me was hoping things would just be normal when we got out of the pass. But this is worse than I imagined. One-hundred-thousand silver each? I've never seen a bounty that high before. Not even close."

Nathan could do nothing to hide the intense guilt he carried. None of this was Brohm's doing, yet for simply associating with Nathan, he'd likely be put through an agonizing death. Even though he'd been given a choice to leave, neither of them could've guessed that Helmsley would've been so desperate to put such a hefty bounty on their heads. Half the country would be looking for them. He glanced over at the big man, wondering if he was finally regretting his choice. If he was, he hid it well.

"I know I keep saying this," Nathan said. "But I'm sorry I got you into this mess."

Brohm's demeanour changed, his face suddenly gentle and sincere. It wasn't at all what Nathan expected.

"Stop saying you're sorry. It was my choice," Brohm said, wrapping an arm around him.

"I'm glad you're with me," Nathan said, sliding an arm across his belly and hugged him close.

They sat in silence, content in the simple pleasure of being held, watching the small flames lick at the darkness. Nathan hadn't realized he'd nodded off until he found himself tucked into a blanket.

"You sleep, l'il buddy. I'll take first watch," Brohm whispered, holding a warm hand on his cheek.

"Thanks," Nathan muttered.

The big man bent over and kissed him on the forehead before stepping off into the dark.

* * *

Nathan woke some time in the night. The fire had gone out, now only a few embers glowing a dull orange. The constant din of night insects buzzed in his ears.

"Brohm?"

"Yuh?" His voice came from above.

Confused, Nathan rose and glanced up, managing to make out the shadow of Brohm's frame sitting on the top of the rock. Attempting to climb up to his position proved a difficult task.

"You can get up over there," Brohm said, pointing off to the right.

Pulling up his hood in the cool air, Nathan stumbled over to a gentle incline, and joined Brohm's side. "I'll take over. You get some rest."

Brohm yawned and stretched. "Yuh, I was gonna wake you up soon."

"Anything of note?"

"Nah. I was expecting those two to come, but nothing yet."

"The night's not over. We'll see what happens."

Brohm nodded in the dark, rising to leave, and Nathan shuffled over to sit on the warmth he'd left behind. Once the big man had settled himself under the blankets, Nathan kept his ears perked. He cursed the insects and their persistent drone, but from his perch, he felt he'd be able to hear movement coming from any direction. As least he hoped he could.

Time dragged by. Into the morning hours, the insects' intensity lessened, and gradually, the dull blue of early morning light began to permeate through the gloom of the forest. Soft snoring below had Nathan spying over the edge to Brohm, yet his smile was interrupted by a loud snap of a dead branch coming from the west.

Instinctively flattening his body onto the rock, he scouted the area, looking for any sign of movement. All was still. He allowed himself one moment to peer over to the horses, noting where he'd left his bow, and scolded himself for not having it within reach.

Looking back, nothing had changed. Had it been an animal, he would've seen or heard something by now. There was no question in his mind Wellor and Rypan were attempting to claim their prize.

He shimmied down the far side of the rock and crept over to his slumbering friend. Covering Brohm's mouth with one hand, he gently shook his shoulder. The big man grunted and struggled for a moment before realizing Nathan's intent.

"I think they're here," Nathan whispered in his ear. "Get your sword. I'll cover you from above."

Wiping the sleep from his eyes, Brohm nodded and pulled the sword from his scabbard lying nearby. Nathan padded over to the horses, arming himself with bow and quiver, and by the time he'd clambered up the rock, Brohm had already stepped out where Nathan had indicated. After ten metres of crouching advancement, Brohm stood up.

"Alright you guys," he bellowed impatiently into the dark forest. "We know you're out there so come on out, yuh?"

Nathan couldn't help but smile at Brohm's lack of tact. It was obvious he wasn't in the mood for games. Certainly not this early in the morning.

A moment passed, followed by another.

Nothing.

Brohm, giving up, turned to look up at Nathan crouched at the top of the rock.

"Nathan! *Behind you!*"

He dropped his bow and grasped for his dagger, but Rypan kicked him down from behind before he could get a grip on the handle. Without time to brace himself, his head smashed against the rock, and Rypan pounced atop him, his heavy weight holding him down.

Despite the deafening high-pitched ring in his ears, Nathan could make out Brohm's panicked voice screaming his name. His senses slowly coming to, he found a knee on his neck, and his hands bound tight behind his back. Blood dripped from his head wound at a steady rate, pooling onto the stone and trailing over the edge.

With a rough yank, he pulled him up to unsteady feet, allowing him to see Brohm and Wellor arguing at the base of the rock. Brohm still brandished his sword, threatening the lanky man who held his hands out, knowing he was outmatched.

"Let him go!" Brohm hollered.

Nathan's assailant pulled a wicked knife and held it firmly to his neck. "Ey!" he called out to Brohm. "Drop it, or your friend here gets it."

"Nice try. You need him alive," Brohm said.

"Are you willing to bet his life on that?" Wellor asked, his voice calm, smooth as silk.

Brohm glanced up toward Nathan in doubt.

"Slay me, and Rypan won't hesitate to cut his throat," Wellor continued with confidence.

Rypan twitched with anticipation, breathing hard on the back of Nathan's neck. "Don't test me. I'll do it."

After a moment of hesitation, Brohm dropped his blade. The steel clattered on the hard ground as if to punctuate his defeat. Nathan's heart sunk. Part of him hoped Brohm would've killed Wellor. Even if it meant his own life, it would've allowed his friend to escape.

"Come on, let's go," Rypan said, walking him down the side of the rock with the blade still at his throat.

Meanwhile Wellor, eyeing Brohm the entire time, carefully retrieved the dropped sword and threw it farther out into the forest. The big man did nothing, his shoulders hunched forward in failure. Once they were off the rock, Rypan kicked Nathan down. From his low vantage point, he caught Brohm's eyes shifting, taking everything in. Gaze locked, Brohm gave him a knowing look, and a subtle hint of a devious smile.

Rypan sheathed his blade and pulled another length of rope. "Alright Brohm, down on the ground and hands behind your back. No funny business."

Wellor stood nearby with a dagger in hand, watching the proceedings.

Brohm crouched to kneel, but instead used that crouch to power a tackle, taking Rypan to the ground. Wasting no time, he yanked the blade from Rypan's belt and plunged it into his back.

Wellor stood stunned a moment, but quickly gained his wits, dashing toward Nathan's prone body, knowing a direct attack at Brohm would mean certain death. Brohm rose up deftly and charged the tall man, colliding and landing beside Nathan. The dagger, knocked from Wellor's grip, fell harmlessly to the ground.

Brohm, red-faced and teeth bared, sat on Wellor's chest, hands around his throat. "Really? You'd sell out one of your own? I know you're an asshole, but this is low, even for you."

"It was too much coin to pass up," he croaked, trying to get a breath. "Come on, old pal. You understand, right?"

His attempt to turn on the charm, given his circumstances, was ridiculous, and only angered Brohm more. He dragged Wellor by his collar farther out into the forest. All the while, the tall man pleaded his apologies, but Brohm was hearing none of it.

With a grunt, he hefted the man roughly into a large tree, smashing his face and dazing him. Searching through the undergrowth, he retrieved his tossed sword, and Wellor turned just in time to find the blade's point against his throat.

"Come on, man," he begged, the charm long gone now. "It doesn't have to end like this. There's gotta be something I can do for you."

"You lost your chance of making it alive when you threatened my buddy there. Any last words?"

Wellor offered nervous laughter. "That wasn't me, it's was Rypan. You killed *him* for that. Everything's square now."

Brohm pushed the blade harder against his throat, the point cutting in. "You take me for an idiot? We both know he was your lackey. So, out with it. What do you want your last words to be?"

The tall man broke down, sobbing. "What am I supposed to say?"

Brohm's face was stone, unflinching. "Nothing, I reckon."

That said, he rammed the sword's point home, puncturing Wellor's neck. He crumpled to the ground making a horrible sound, grasping his neck while blood spilled between his fingers. Brohm watched a moment while he writhed, then wiped the blood from his blade onto Wellor's clothes before sheathing it.

Face still stone and jaw set, Brohm lumbered toward Nathan's prone body. He knelt behind him and pulled his dagger, using it to cut his bonds. As soon as he was free, Brohm turned him to inspect his head injury. The blood flow had stopped, but the wound throbbed. Worry crept onto Brohm's face.

"I'll be fine," Nathan said.

"You're sure?"

Nathan nodded. "Thanks big guy."

The dead men had hefty coinpurses tied to their belts, adding to Nathan and Brohm's growing collection.

"Y'know, we're not doing too bad here," Brohm said, weighing the coins in his hands.

"Given we'll need to stop at Morringstone, we can use some of it to grease a few wheels if need be," Nathan said, wrapping a makeshift bandage around his head from cloth strips.

By the time they were back on the road east, the day had already begun to warm up. Regardless, Nathan kept his hood up to hide his face from nosy

passersby.

Two hours later, a small clearing in the woods announced a roadside inn, acting as a waypoint for travellers heading to and from Morringstone. A few men stood outside, readying their horses and chatting, but none seemed interested or even acknowledged them as they passed.

It wasn't until late afternoon when Brohm, who was leading, signalled to slow down. Standing from the stirrups of his saddle, he peeked over a small crest on the road.

"Patrol," he said in a hoarse whisper.

They jumped from their mounts, and with reins in hand, led them into the forest. The patrol moved slowly, allowing enough time to hide fifty metres into the underbrush. It consisted of ten mounted troops, and while each man attentively scanned the area, none spotted them or the horses. As they fell out of sight, Brohm offered Nathan a look of relief, but they held still a few minutes before making their way back to the road, continuing east.

Nightfall came, yet there was still no sign of the village.

"What you reckon we should do?" Brohm asked.

"I'm not sure. Morringstone must be close."

They decided to push ahead, welcomed by fireflies in the deepening gloam. After four hours of slow progression, Nathan caught a glimpse of torchlights and dimly lit windows ahead. They slowed to a trot and surveyed the entrance. Despite being a relatively large village, there was no surrounding walls or guards posted, and given the late hour, the roads were deserted. Regardless, Nathan led Brohm through the narrow streets and alleyways, away from the torchlight, until they came to a featureless squat building.

After tying their mounts to a hitching post, they stepped up to what appeared to be the front door. Nathan knocked, yet no answer came. Lamplight emanated from a curtained window near the door, and they could hear men inside speaking. Brohm nudged Nathan aside impatiently and banged on the door with a fist. A raised voice came from inside, but they were unable to make out the words. The big man offered his crooked smile and a wink.

"Brohm, sometimes I think you like making trouble."

A small hatch opened in the door to reveal an angry face, eyeing them up and down. "Who are you, and what in hells do you want at this late hour?"

"Tell Nyle that Nathan is here to see him."

The man's eyes narrowed in contempt, and then the hatch slammed shut. Both men briefly exchanged glances, listening to the muffled voices within. More footsteps, followed by a heavy bolt sliding out from the lock. The door opened slightly, lamplight flooding out into the road, and an older man with greying hair peeked his head out. Upon recognizing Nathan, the man's eyes grew wide, and he momentarily stood speechless.

"N-Nathan? Gods, what are you doing here?" he babbled. "Quickly! Come in, come in."

He beckoned the two to enter, and shut the door to latch the bolt lock. The outside appearance of the house would mislead anyone to assume the inside was bare and dirty, but it was quite the opposite. Lavish rugs and vibrant wall hangings filled the large room, accompanied by weapons and artifacts on display. It was an attempt to be cozy, but instead felt overbearing. The angry man eyed them from a chair at a table. It seemed they'd interrupted a game of cards.

"Give me a few moments," Nyle said to his disgruntled friend.

He took one of the lamps and led Nathan and Brohm through a doorway on

the far side of the room, shepherding them into a study. It was just as stuffy, lined with too many books and other curiosities. He closed the door and turned to Nathan, astonished.

"What in the hells are you doing here?"

"We've got a problem," Nathan said sheepishly.

"No kidding. You and your friend's face are plastered all over the village. The word is any settlement of note has the same poster."

Brohm shook his head nervously, distressed by the news.

"I know," Nathan said. "We've been waylaid once already. We're working on a solution."

"It's simple. The solution is to get off this continent as quickly as you can."

"We both know that's a risky option. All the ports will be heavily guarded. We've got something else in mind. But we need supplies, specifically food that will travel well."

"Where are you going?"

"I think it's best you not know. But if our plan works, this'll likely be the last time we meet."

Nyle eyed them with suspicion. "That sounds . . . ominous."

"How about it, Nyle. This needs to happen tonight so we can be out before dawn. Can you help us out?"

He tapped a finger to his lips as he thought, marvelling at the two of them. "I think I can help you."

He offered for them to sit in plush velvet chairs, and opened the door to leave. "It's best you stay here, out of sight. I'll be back shortly."

That said, he rushed out of the room, closing the door behind him.

Brohm looked over to Nathan. "You reckon we can trust him?"

Nathan stood and walked over to the window, peeking through the thick curtains. After a few moments Nyle appeared, dashing down the road and into one of the narrow alleyways.

"I hope so."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

They managed to get some sleep, only to be interrupted by Nyle bursting through the door. Brohm's instinct had him on his feet, sword drawn and ready to swing before Nyle could blink. Hands up in the air, he stood there like a fool until Brohm sheathed his blade.

"Sorry. You surprised me," he stated simply.

Nyle stood motionless for a moment before managing to recover from his fright. "Where'd you find this guy?"

Nathan smiled and patted Brohm on the shoulder. "That's a long story, but I wouldn't have anyone else by my side in all this mess."

Brohm, his face flushed, scratched the back of his head.

"So, were you able to get some supplies?" Nathan asked.

"It's done," Nyle said. "There should be enough for a fortnight. More if you ration it wisely."

Nathan clasped arms with him. "Thanks. You've done us a great service."

"Come, I was about to have a midnight snack. Join me."

"A kind offer, Nyle. But we really should be go—"

Brohm's stomach growled like a cornered dog, and both men stared bewildered at the big man.

"Urhm, sorry," Brohm said, rubbing his belly absentmindedly.

"Maybe we will stay for a bite," Nathan said, unable to stifle a laugh.

Nyle led them to the kitchen and motioned to sit at the table. He prepared a platter of fruit, cheese and bread, and Nathan found his own stomach growling while he watched him work.

"Pull some glasses from the shelf. You should find a bottle of wine there too."

Nathan poured them all a glass of wine just as Nyle brought the platter to the table. Brohm took his glass, offering a toast.

"To good food and drink, and good friends," he said, offering Nathan a subtle smile.

"Cheers!"

As soon as the three men clinked their glasses, Brohm drained his and helped himself to the bounty at the table. Nathan joined him, but with a polite restraint.

"It's been a long time, Nathan," Nyle mused. "I'm still hurt you decided not to work for me."

"I made my intentions clear."

"Yes, I remember it well. You were rather rude."

"You wouldn't take *no* for an answer."

"Can you blame me for trying?" the man asked with a sly grin.

Nathan felt his face flush, and glanced over to Brohm, who's attention was taken by the act of eating. More precisely, the act of shovelling as much food into his mouth as he could.

"Wait a minute," Nyle said. "Don't tell me that you and him—"

Nathan cut his words short with an fiery stare.

"Okay, okay," Nyle said. "But, really? You could do much better than—"

Nathan stood, inducing a loud squeak of wood against wood as he pushed the chair away. Brohm looked up from his meal.

"I think we've overstayed our welcome," Nathan said. "We should be going."

"But we just started eating," the big man complained.

"Please, continue your meal, Brohm. Let me speak with him privately a

moment," Nyle said, beckoning Nathan to join him.

Nathan stood his ground for a moment, but then with a loud sigh and rolling of the eyes, reluctantly stepped into the darkened hall where Nyle waited for him.

"I'm sorry, Nathan. I didn't mean anything by that."

"Yes, you did. You said exactly what you meant to say."

"Okay. I said I was sorry," Nyle said, clasping his shoulder. "I'm just . . . jealous, okay?"

Nathan allowed himself a calming breath. "That's why I could never work for you. I told you before. Business and pleasure—"

"They don't mix for you. I know," Nyle said, nodding.

"Plus, I tried to say it as nicely as I could, but you just aren't my type."

"Yeah, yeah, I remember," Nyle said, not wanting to hear it again. "It's just when I saw you in the doorway, all those old feelings came back."

"I'm sorry. Coming here was a mistake."

"No, no, no. I'm glad you came. Even if just for a few moments, to see your face again . . ."

Nathan gently pushed him away. "Don't do this to yourself."

The man nodded, and gestured to step back into the kitchen.

Brohm looked up as Nathan entered. "Everything okay?"

"Yeah, everything's fine. Don't worry about it," he said, joining him at the table.

"After your meal, you should rest for a few hours before journeying out," Nyle said.

Brohm caught Nathan's eye, covertly giving his crooked smile, reminding him of his desire for a warm bed.

"Honestly, it's no trouble," Nyle continued. "I always have rooms for my hires when they need a place to lie low."

"I suppose a few hours can't hurt," Nathan said.

"Great! I'll make sure a room is prepared while you two finish up." Nyle clasped his hands together and rushed out of the kitchen.

Once they were finished, Nyle led them to a long room. It was spartan with neat six beds in a row.

"Kinda reminds me of my old barracks, only cleaner," Brohm said.

"A barracks? What, you were in the army?" Nyle scoffed.

"I was."

"Oh," Nyle said, offering Nathan an astonished look.

"We'll be leaving early," Nathan said to change the subject. "So we might as well say goodbye now."

"I'm sorry to see you go so quickly."

"How much do we owe you for the supplies?"

Nyle waved his hand. "Nothing, nothing. Please."

"I was serious when I said you'd likely never see me again. If you're hoping to use this as a favour—"

"Nonsense."

"We appreciate your help." Brohm offered a hand, to which Nyle accepted and shook.

Nathan offered the same, but instead of shaking his hand, Nyle hugged him.

"I'm going to miss you all over again. Damn you for coming back," Nyle said, hiding his emotions behind a laugh.

Nathan returned it half-heartedly, not wanting to give him any false pretenses.

"If things change, promise me you'll come back to visit?"

"No promises," Nathan said plainly.

"Well, it was worth a shot. The supplies are in two sacks at the front door. Cured pork and fair number of biscuits."

"Thanks again."

Nyle turned to Brohm. "You take good care of him, okay?"

Brohm nodded, and Nyle exited the room, closing the door behind him. Nathan exhaled and rubbed his face.

"He's got a thing for you, huh?"

"Yeah, has for a long time. He's a persistent bastard."

Brohm chuckled and sat on the nearest bed, removing his boots. With a yawn, he lay back and moaned ecstatically. "Oh comfy bed, where have you been all my life?"

Nathan extinguished the lamp and lay down on the next bed beside Brohm. Had they more time, he would've considered bunking with him, but he knew rest was more important.

* * *

"Nathan, we've got a problem."

Brohm's deep voice woke him from his slumber, and opening his eyes, found sunlight streaming through a window at the far end of the room.

"We overslept!" Nathan said.

Brohm acknowledged with a grunt while donning his boots. Nathan rose to glance out the window. It was late morning and the streets were a hubbub of activity. He opened the door to peek into the hallway.

All was quiet.

They snuck their way down the long corridor, peering into open doors they crossed, but all were empty.

"Nathan?" Nyle's voice came from behind.

They turned to find the man at the other end of the hallway, wearing a housecoat. "What are you doing here? I thought you said you'd be gone before first light."

"That was the plan," Nathan grumbled.

"Well, don't fret. Make the most of it and rest some more, and you can leave after dark tonight."

"I really don't want to wait that long. We should be moving now."

"Have you looked outside? Leaving now would be a sure death sentence."

"He's got a point," Brohm chimed in.

Nathan drew a deep breath, pinching the bridge of his nose, and Brohm wrapped an arm around his shoulder to comfort him.

"Don't worry, l'il buddy. We'll leave tonight. What's an extra day?"

Nathan knew Brohm was right, but felt like they were testing their luck staying in the village.

After breakfast, time passed slowly, and the warm atmosphere made for a lazy day. Brohm spent most of it exploring the many rooms in vague interest, and then napped in various chairs, as though testing their worthiness.

Lounging on a wide couch amid golden afternoon sunlight, Nathan and Nyle took the time to catch up on old news. But what Nyle wanted was information on their current predicament, and after badgering him for details, Nathan finally revealed the reason for the bounty on their heads.

"So Brohm's involvement was purely happenstance?" Nyle asked.

Nathan nodded sombrely. "I told him the whole story, and offered that we split up, but the big lug just wanted to stick together."

“Loyal to a fault. I can see why you like him.”

“We’ve been through a lot in a short time. I really do care for him.”

“He seems to care for you a great deal as well.”

“Yeah . . .” Nathan trailed off, wiping an eye.

“Are you crying?”

“No, there’s just something in my eye—”

“Oh shut up, you’re crying. In all the time I’ve known you, I’ve never seen you so open to your feelings. What’s changed?”

Nathan sat silent for a moment in an attempt to control his emotions, but lost to tears streaming down his cheek. “Because, damn it, I just want to live my life with him without being hunted at every turn. All of this is my doing, and if he gets killed in this mess, I could never forgive myself.”

Nathan sobbed into his hands while Nyle looked on, unsure what to do.

“Sorry,” Nathan managed after drawing a stuttered breath.

“You’ve changed,” Nyle said quietly. “I like the new you.”

“Nathan, what’s wrong?”

Both men looked up to find Brohm filling the doorway, a look of concern on his face. Nathan tried to compose himself, but failed miserably.

“He feels guilty for the position his actions have put you in,” Nyle said.

Brohm stepped into the room, and squeezed himself beside Nathan. “I keep telling you. It was my choice. It always was.”

Nathan’s sobbing returned, and he wrapped an arm around Brohm’s neck, burying his face into his chest.

“I’ll take my leave,” Nyle said uncomfortably and padded out of the room.

Brohm pulled Nathan away so he could look into his eyes. With a thumb, he wiped a tear from his cheek, and offered a mysterious smile that confounded him.

“What did I do to deserve you?” Nathan asked breathlessly.

“You didn’t do nothing. I’m nobody special.”

“You’re special to me,” Nathan said, smiling through tears.

Brohm swallowed and choked. “Stop it, you’re gonna make *me* cry.”

The big man pulled him close again in a crushing hug, allowing Nathan to give him a kiss on the neck. Held in his strong embrace for a time, he managed to regain his composure.

“I love you, big guy,” he whispered.

Suddenly, the calm broke with angry shouts originating from down the hall. Confused, both men rose to their feet and rushed to investigate.

“I don’t care if they *are* your friends, Nyle. I’m taking them in,” a voice demanded.

Nathan and Brohm stepped into the parlour, interrupting the heated conversation between Nyle and the angry man they’d met the night before.

“Taking us where?” Nathan asked.

“Nowhere,” Nyle said with finality. “Darryl, please—”

“No!” Darryl pointed at them. “They’re worth too much. You two are coming with me to the guard’s post.”

“Over my dead body,” Brohm said with arms crossed, puffing up his chest.

“If you insist,” Darryl said, pulling a knife.

“No violence,” Nyle pleaded.

Darryl stopped his approach toward Brohm and offered Nyle a sidelong glance. “You might be one step removed, but you still peddle violence, old man.”

“Darryl! What’s gotten into you?” Nyle cried.

“Isn’t it obvious? These two will ensure my early retirement.”

Nathan noted Brohm was unarmed and pulled his dagger, moving in between them, but the big man pushed him aside.

"I got this," he rumbled.

Brohm lumbered toward Darryl, who stood his ground without fear, brandishing his piddly knife. Before he could lunge at Brohm, the big man caught his hand with ease and twisted savagely. A terrible crack filled the room, and he dropped the knife with a howl. Brohm spun him around and held him in a tight headlock.

"Darryl, you fool," Nyle said, a hand to his face in disappointment.

"What do I do with this idiot?" Brohm asked Nathan.

"Uhm," he pondered while Darryl's face turned blue.

"You're going to kill him," Nyle said. "Let him go."

Brohm roughly tossed him to the floor, and loomed over the gasping man.

"We have to go. Now!" Nathan said, sheathing his dagger and looking out the nearest window. "The crowds have thinned. We'll have to take our chances."

"But this guy's gonna tell we've been here," Brohm said, cracking his knuckles. "I reckon we end him."

Nyle stood aghast. "Absolutely not. What kind of barbaric animal are you?"

"One that fights back when cornered," he replied with defiance. "I've no beef with you. You've been a kind host, but your friend here made a mistake."

Darryl cowered at his feet, tenderly holding his broken wrist.

"I don't think he's going anywhere soon," Nathan said. "By the time he does, we'll be long gone."

Grunting his disapproval, Brohm stepped away from the downed man.

"I'm sorry things ended like this," Nathan said. "Try to delay him as long as you can."

Nyle, glaring at Darryl with shame, simply nodded.

opening the door to peek out, Nathan was relieved to find the dusty road almost deserted. He pulled up his hood and stepped out toward the horses. Brohm emerged a few moments later with their supplies, and they were soon on their way to the north end of the large village. The late afternoon sun drew lengthening shadows from the surrounding buildings, allowing them to hide in plain sight.

"I guess we should've figured out which road leads to Tornel Keep," Nathan said.

"What? I reckoned you knew."

Nathan shook his head. "I guess our best bet is to look for an old path heading into the forest."

As they reached the northern edge, neither direction gave a clue to their destination. Hoping for the best, Nathan pointed east, nudging his mount to a trot. After nearly three hundred metres and no sign of the exit, the road ended in a cul-de-sac. A few people glanced up from their work, not used to receiving visitors this far along the road.

"Hello, can I help you?" one man asked.

"No, thank you. Just made a wrong turn," Nathan said while turning his horse to leave.

The folks they'd passed earlier, who had largely ignored them, now watched in curiosity as they retraced their steps.

"Hey!" The voice wasn't friendly, and Nathan stiffened in his saddle.

"I recognize you two! Stop!" another voice said.

They urged their mounts to a gallop, launching dust clouds into the air. Neither of them looked back to see if they were being pursued.

"Up ahead," Brohm called out, pointing to a small opening in the trees.

Nathan had no idea if it was the correct path, but their situation forced them to swerve onto the overgrown road, darkened by large trees overhead. Slowing their horses on the uneven ground, Nathan risked glancing back. The exit, a bright mouth at the end of the tunnel of trees, shrank rapidly.

"I don't think anyone's giving chase," he said.

Brohm peered over his shoulder to confirm. "That was too close. C'mon, let's keep moving."

As they travelled onward, the forest grew denser and the road narrowed. After a few hours, the dying light forced them to stop, and they set up camp fifty metres from the path, building a small fire just beyond a large fallen log.

"What do you know about Tornel Keep?" Nathan asked, sitting against the log beside him.

The big man shrugged. "Didn't you hear the stories when you were a kid?"

"No, I didn't grow up around here. I've never heard of the place before Morgana mentioned it."

"Well, the story goes that Tornel went mad and ordered to have everyone in the keep killed. Obviously his men didn't follow the order, and the bishop had him locked in the dungeon until they could figure why he wanted everyone dead.

"That night, Tornel managed to conjure some kind of evil spirits. They invaded the keep from below and, following Tornel's order, killed everyone. Apparently the bodies were pretty messed up.

"When they found Tornel's cell, the floor and walls were covered with runes and symbols drawn in blood, his own blood. He died because of it, and he still haunts the keep to his day, tormented by the spirits he summoned."

Nathan chuckled. “A tall tale.”

“Well, when you’re a kid, you’re gullible, yuh?”

“Do you have any *real* information about the keep?”

“I guess not.” Brohm poked at the fire with a stick. “So if you didn’t grow up here, where are you from?”

Nathan gazed beyond the trees, pulling back distant memories. “I haven’t thought about that in a long time,” he said wistfully. “I grew up in the Western Steppes.”

“Really? I’ve not heard much about those lands. You crossed the Great Divide to get here?”

“Yeah, that wasn’t a fun time. It took nearly two months to cross.”

Brohm was astonished. “Two months!”

“I travelled in an expedition with a group of explorers and merchants. I learned a lot about survival during that trek.”

“Why’d you leave home?”

“Well, I . . . never really had a home. Never knew my parents. And never got a straight answer about who they were.”

“Wow. That’s gotta be tough. Not knowing your ma or pa.”

Nathan shrugged. “Can’t miss what you never had. Anyway, I gave up trying to figure out my history. There was nothing for me there, so I decided to try making a new life for myself here.”

Nathan rose to place another log on the fire. “It was during that expedition I met Graham.”

“Your lover?” Brohm asked.

Nathan nodded. “You get to know someone pretty well when you’re together for a stretch of time. It didn’t take long for us to notice each other.” He smiled, realizing the similarities in their current situation.

“How long ago was all this?”

“I was twenty-four, so twelve years ago.” He shook his head in disbelief. “Time is strange.”

* * *

At first light, they struck camp and continued north on the abandoned path. The thick canopy above only allowed a subtle hint of daylight, tinting their surroundings a greenish hue. Vines grew in small patches amid the branches, yet as the day progressed, the trees became choked with the snaking tendrils, accentuating the wild nature of the forest. At times, they had to slow down to move around smaller trees that had taken root in the road.

After hours of monotonous travel, they emerged into a clearing, welcomed by bright afternoon sunlight and a breeze that brought the undeniable smell of the sea. Once their eyes had accustomed to the light, they saw the ragged dark ruins of Tornel Keep silhouetted against the sky.

Nathan slowed his mount to take in the sight. Despite the warmth, and comforting trill of cicadas and birds in the distance, a shiver ran up his back. The old keep filled him with a strange uneasiness, and judging by Brohm’s face, he felt the same way.

They approached cautiously, riding through long grass that dominated the clearing, erasing any sign of the road. Nathan heard a subtle hint of ocean waves hitting the coast, and spotted dark clouds looming on the horizon to the east. However, from that distance, he couldn’t guess the heading of the storm.

Nathan shivered again as they rode into the shadow of the high, crumbling walls. The air was curiously cool, as though the keep absorbed warmth from

its surroundings. The entrance, a wide archway in the stone wall, revealed a small open courtyard within. Lichen-covered statues, posing heroically, stood in the corners. In the centre sat a fountain filled with murky water, a larger statue emerging from it, presumably Lord Tornel himself. Wide steps on the left and right led to a covered colonnade surrounding the courtyard.

They dismounted and guided their horses into a stone-covered stable. Upon returning to the courtyard, Brohm ventured right, climbing the steps into the shade of the colonnade. Dark portals leading into the keep beckoned them, and Nathan peeked into the first one they came upon. Making out a few details within, he found a small antechamber with three corridors exiting in different directions. Two led into darkness, yet sunlight shone from around the corner of the third.

"I'm gonna get that torch. I reckon we'll need it," Brohm said, heading back to the stable.

Nathan nodded, and stepped into the antechamber toward the lit corridor. The stone walls dulled the sound from outside, allowing the keep's empty silence to fill his ears. It was strange to consider that so many years ago, this was a bustling place filled with people. Now, only a crumbling, forgotten skeleton remained.

The corridor continued left around the corner, with a series of open windows on the right side, unveiling the grassy clearing and forest beyond. Opposite the windows were wooden doorways. Some were shut tight, others partly open and hanging askew on rusted hinges. Nathan felt as though someone was watching him from the darkness within.

"Where'd you go?" Brohm's voice echoed from around the corner.

He stepped back and saw the big man in the antechamber with the lit torch in hand, peering into one of the dark corridors. "I'm over here."

Brohm joined him, and they continued down the long hallway. Arriving at the first half-opened door, Nathan tugged on it, only to pull it from its hinges completely. He jumped clear as the heavy oak slab fell to the floor with a loud clatter, a cloud of dust rising from the commotion. Brohm glanced about nervously as though the sound would wake someone. As ridiculous as it seemed, Nathan felt the same way, not wanting to disturb anything more than they had to.

Brohm dusted Nathan's shoulder. "You okay?"

"Yeah, let's see what's in here."

Holding the torch ahead, Brohm stepped into the dark room. To their disappointment, it was empty except for broken chairs in one corner. Whatever purpose this room held would remain a mystery.

"I guess they took everything when they left," Nathan suggested.

Peeking into the other rooms, they discovered similar findings. The hallway veered left into darkness, and they carried onward, ignoring the remaining doorways lining the passageway, until coming to a four-way intersection.

"This place is like a maze." Nathan said.

"I reckon we went the wrong way. This seems like living quarters."

Brohm stepped past him along the left hallway, but instead of finding a long corridor, there was a wide stair with shallow steps leading down.

"We've gone this far," he said. "Might as well continue."

They descended, arriving at a great hallway leading left and right. Mouldy, torn tapestries lined the walls, and large braziers sat in the centre of the hall at regular intervals. Indirect, dim sunlight came from both directions. Brohm turned right, halting at a rusty splatter on the floor and nearest wall.

"That looks like blood," he whispered.

Nathan scratched the flaky substance with a boot. “If it is, it’s very old.”

The rusty trail continued farther down the hall, originating from a solid wooden door, and Nathan reached for the iron ring handle to open it.

“Wait! I dunno if that’s such a good idea,” Brohm said, a nervous tremble in his throat.

“Don’t worry. Whatever happened here was a long time ago.”

He pulled the ring on the door, its tired hinges shrieking their discontent. Brohm gasped in surprise as the sound reverberated down the long corridor. They held perfectly still, listening for something to break the silence. Nathan pulled again, but the bolts holding the ring came loose, and the whole assembly clattered to the ground.

After a moment of hesitation, Brohm handed the torch to Nathan. “Let me try.”

Cramming his fingers into the small gap, he strained against the rusted hinges and forced the door open. Nathan peeked in with the torch, revealing broken stone steps awkwardly spiralling down into darkness.

“I’m willing to bet this is the way to the dungeon,” he said grimly.

At that moment, a blinding lightning flash lit the dark space, and thunder shook the foundation. Nathan nearly tripped as he spun around in fright, finding Brohm wide-eyed in a similar state. Recovering from the shock, both men couldn’t help but chuckle at their foolish reaction.

Brohm peered down the steps, sniffing the musty, dank air. “When we talked about looking for this amulet, it didn’t seem like a bad idea. But standing here now, I admit I’m nervous.”

Nathan nodded. “I won’t deny this keep certainly has a creepy quality to it. Anyway, it’s too late in the day to begin our search in earnest. Let’s find a place to rest for the night.”

Leaving the dark landing behind, they stepped further down the hall, arriving at more wide and shallow steps. Beyond was an immense dining hall with three-storey-tall windows at the far end. A few had stained glass still intact, and despite their muted colour, it gave an impression of the grandeur that once was.

The far corner of the hall had collapsed, revealing a dark and turbulent sky, and rainwater dripped from cracks in the mortar of the stone ceiling. A series of massive firepits lined the wall, and Nathan stepped toward the nearest one.

“It seems dry. Let’s set up camp here,” Nathan offered.

The arrival of the storm bolstered the chilly air within the keep. Using old wooden chairs as fuel, they lit an ample fire to warm themselves. Brohm’s stomach growled, rising above the din of the storm.

“You hungry, big guy?”

“Yuh, but I don’t want to go back in the dark to the stable though.”

Nathan gave him a grin. “Follow me.”

He led them back to the wide hall, past the dungeon door and the wide stair they emerged from earlier.

“You’re going the wrong way,” Brohm said.

Nathan took his hand and continued toward the dim light beyond. They came to wide steps mirroring those of the dining hall, and climbing up, arrived at the courtyard.

“You see? We just went the wrong way in.”

“How did you know this would lead here?”

Nathan shrugged. “It seemed logical that the keep be built that way.”

Brohm, a bemused look on his face, watched Nathan as he headed to the stable to retrieve their supplies.

* * *

An urgent shake woke Nathan from his peaceful slumber, and in the light of the fire, Brohm's expression told him something was wrong.

"Th-there's ghosts," the big man whispered in his ear.

Nathan rose up to look over Brohm's shoulder, finding seven ghostly figures faintly glowing in a white-blue fog. They appeared to be speaking to each other, yet their voices were distant and jumbled. None seemed to notice their presence.

"The stories were true," Brohm continued. "This keep *is* haunted."

"Yeah, but they don't seem very hostile."

Nathan took a nearby piece of wood and chucked it across the hall.

"What did you do that for?" Brohm asked.

It hit the floor in a clamour, and Nathan observed the outcome. None of the figures even flinched at the sound. He tentatively stood up, and took a hesitant step forward.

"Be careful," Brohm called out in a hoarse whisper.

There was no change in the ghosts' behaviour as he approached, and Nathan's confidence grew with each step. Reaching the closest one, he waved nervously to greet it.

"H-hello?"

There was no response, nor any indication that it detected him.

"Hello," he spoke again with more presence. "Can you hear me?"

They continued their conversation, oblivious to his presence. It was then Nathan noticed two more figures flanking the wide stairway. They looked to be armoured guards standing at attention, holding ghostly pikes. Keeping an eye on the seven figures, he padded toward the nearest guard.

Nathan waved a hand across its face with no reaction. It stared past him, shifting its weight from one foot to another. Nathan held out his hand to touch the blue entity, and felt intense cold as he brushed against its arm. The sound of sizzling filled his ears, like meat burning over an open flame. He jerked back to examine his fingers, but found them unharmed. He attempted again, prodding deeper. It felt like dipping his fingers into ice-cold water, and the sound of sizzling increased the deeper he pushed. Without warning, the guard's head snapped to his direction, and Nathan fell backward in fright.

"They're coming for you," Brohm called out.

Craning his head, Nathan caught sight of the figures stepping toward him with purpose. He scrambled to his feet, tripped over a loose brick, and tumbled into Brohm. The blue figures strode past, leaving the large hall with the two sentries in tow.

"I thought the guard saw me," Nathan said, gasping for air. "But I realize now it wasn't looking at me, it was looking past me at the other ghosts."

Brohm rushed to the exit of the hall and peered into the dark. "They're gone."

"It makes a lot more sense why this place was left abandoned. Even if they're harmless, nobody wants to live in a keep filled with ghosts," Nathan said.

"How do you know they won't hurt us?" Brohm asked, returning to Nathan's side.

"Well, I guess I don't know for sure, but I touched one and nothing happened. They just seem to be reliving their day."

"Their last day?"

Nathan shrugged. “Try to get some rest. My heart’s still pumping from that fright, so I’ll stand watch.”

“I doubt I’ll be getting much sleep either,” Brohm mumbled, resting his head beside Nathan.

“Just try. I’ll wake you in a few hours.”

Despite Brohm’s statement, he fell asleep in short order. Nathan kept vigil over him, taking comfort in the big man’s gentle snoring. More ghostly apparitions entered and left the hall during the course of the night. Not once did they notice Nathan’s presence, solidifying his assumption. He pondered whom they were, how long they’d been repeating their actions, and if they were aware of this hell they were trapped in.

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

Morning came with the sun shining brightly into the once grand hall. Birds fluttered about broken rafters, and a cool sea breeze blew in from the gaping hole in the far corner. In the distance came the call of seagulls, and the crashing of water against the coast.

After striking camp, they packed Nathan's rucksack with supplies, and headed to the large door they discovered the day before. Both men stood silent, dreading the dark entrance. Nathan didn't want to do this, but knew finding the amulet for Morgana was the only option to rid themselves of their pursuers, permanently.

"Ready?" Nathan asked.

They locked eyes, and Brohm gave Nathan his crooked smile, heartening his resolve.

"Now or never, yuh? Let's get this over with," he said, leading the way.

The rusty red trail they encountered in the hallway continued down the narrow spiralling steps. With each turn, the ceiling came closer, and Nathan noted Brohm's quickened breathing in the claustrophobic space.

"Breathe slow, big guy," he said, laying a hand on his shoulder.

Brohm nodded, stopping to gather his wits.

"You're doing fine," Nathan continued.

They resumed down the seemingly never-ending spiral. Thick spiderwebs shrouded the way forward, and Brohm used the torch to burn them away, peeking in the nooks for hidden spiders planning to land on them. They finally reached the bottom, however the low ceiling remained forcing them to slouch. The hallway offered two directions, and the mysterious rusty trail continued along the left.

Brohm pointed the torch to his right. "How about we go this way?"

"You'll have no complaints from me."

The hallway was too narrow for both men to walk abreast, so Nathan stood close behind with a firm grip on his shoulder, trying to glimpse the way forward around his big frame. They entered a small room with a wooden table and a few chairs, grey and rotten. Two more passages exited the room, and they explored the nearest one. Its purpose became apparent as they passed row after row of rusty gated doorways.

"Hopefully no prisoners were left behind," Brohm mumbled.

They peeked into the cells, finding them empty, and after six rows of doors, arrived at a dead end. The alternate passage offered more empty cells, however as they neared the end, Nathan caught a glint of light on the floor. A key, and a desiccated hand reaching for it through a gated doorway.

"Poor bugger," Brohm said in a grim tone.

They pondered in silence at the skeleton reaching for its freedom, never to have it. Brohm crouched and placed the key into the hand in pity.

"What a way to go. In the dark . . . alone."

All routes exhausted, they backtracked to the spiral stairs, and the rusty trail.

"How long you reckon blood lasts before decomposing?" Brohm pondered.

"No idea. Why do you ask?"

"Well, I'm beginning to think this happened after everyone abandoned this place."

"Maybe so, but it's still old. I'm willing to bet whoever's blood this belongs to is dead, and the attacker long gone."

"But what if—"

“Brohm, we’re down here for one reason: finding the amulet. Once we do, I just want to forget this sad place, alright?”

The big man offered a solemn nod.

“I’ll admit I’m curious to know what happened here,” Nathan continued. “But gods, this place creeps me out, and I want out of here as quickly as possible.”

They followed the trail, arriving at a gloomy chamber. Stepping in, the ceiling rose up, finally allowing them to stand up straight. Various torture devices lined the walls, alongside tables containing an array of brutal tools. In the centre sat a stone-lined pit, and the rusty trail ended there, telling the story of a body that had been dragged and dumped. Brohm peered into the depths, yet was unable to see the bottom.

The two men took in the sombre chamber in silence as they continued to explore the far end, finding another downward spiral staircase choked with spiderwebs.

“I don’t like this,” Brohm said, glancing about with apprehension.

“This is the only passage left to explore. Here, give me the torch. I’ll lead.”

Nathan cleared the way of webs and made his way down the crumbling steps with Brohm reluctantly in tow. After minutes of slow advance, they reached the bottom, revealing a crooked corridor. The ceiling had collapsed, rock and debris partially blocking the way.

“The way ahead is clear,” Nathan said, peering through a narrow gap.

“I don’t know if I can do this.”

Nathan glanced over his shoulder to find Brohm bracing the walls at both sides, as though holding them up to hinder their crushing squeeze. He rushed to the big man, took an arm and guided him to sit down.

“I can’t breathe,” Brohm gasped, his anxious breath visible in the frigid air.

“Yes you can. You’re breathing fine,” Nathan said, mopping sweat from his brow.

“I hate this,” he whispered.

Nathan’s heart sunk to see him in such a state. He wanted to hold him, comfort him, and pull him out of this gods-forsaken hole.

“I promise you, Brohm. This will be the last time we ever do something like this.”

“I’ll hold you to that.”

“We just gotta get through this. We’ve come this far. We can’t stop now.”

Brohm shut his eyes tight and a tear rolled down his cheek. He wiped at it angrily. “I hate you for this.”

“If that’s what it takes to continue on, you can hate me all you want.”

They locked eyes. Brohm’s jaw was set, brow furrowed.

“You ready to do this?” Nathan asked.

The big man nodded.

Nathan clambered up the loose rock, holding the torch ahead of him while crawling through the short passage to the other side. Safely through, he looked back to see Brohm’s face glowing in the flickering light.

“I can do this. I can do this,” he told himself.

With bared teeth, he dived into the hole and elbowed his way in. However once he was halfway through, Nathan could see his fear fighting for dominance.

“I’m stuck!”

“You’re not stuck,” Nathan said calmly, placing the torch safely out of the way against the rubble. “Suck in your gut and give me your hands.”

They clasped wrists, and Nathan braced himself, pulling hard while Brohm

tried to wiggle himself through. Without warning, he broke free, falling atop Nathan and pinning him down.

"Now *I* can't breathe," Nathan gasped.

With no room in the narrow passage to roll off, Brohm grasped at the walls to pull himself up. "You okay?"

"Yeah, just got the wind knocked outta me," Nathan said, coughing.

After dusting themselves off, Brohm handed him the torch, and they continued to the end of the corridor to find another large chamber. The ceiling revealed the other end of the pit, and on the floor below lay bones, dumped and forgotten. Blood-stained tables lined the walls with rusted butcher's knives and cleavers strewn about.

"What in hells is this place?" Nathan asked.

"I reckon it's best we don't know."

To the left, they found another passageway with more cells lining the walls. A doorway stood beyond, however the opening was completed blocked by stone and rubble.

Brohm kicked a rock in disbelief. "Great! Now what?"

Nathan examined the collapsed passageway, but found no way through aside from digging, and even that would likely prove impossible. He cursed under his breath.

"This was all for nothing," Brohm continued.

"We had to try."

"I know. But what do we do now? We're back to where we started."

Nathan pondered, but could think of nothing.

"Maybe take our chances at a port," Brohm suggested. "Cross the sea and . . . start another life, I guess?"

"It's risky," Nathan said. "But I think you're right. It's the only option we have left."

They trudged back to the butcher's room. Brohm lagged behind, clearly dreading having to squeeze through the small hole again. However, just as they reached the pile of bones, Nathan stopped in his tracks.

"Do you hear that?" he asked.

"What?"

"Listen."

Both men stood still, listening to the silence. Nathan's ears perked at the ever-slight sound of whistling wind.

"I heard that. Where's it coming from?" Brohm asked.

Nathan rushed about the chamber, shining light into the dark shadows, and found the source at the far end of the room.

"Brohm, come here."

Bricks lined the chamber wall, however one corner was natural rock, revealing a cave entrance.

"You think this is what Morgana was talking about?" Brohm asked, a slight hint of hope in his voice.

They stepped through the craggy portal, torch held up to shine light deeper within. The simple and straightforward corridors of the dungeon didn't prepare them for the labyrinthine system ahead. Passageways branched off randomly, only to reconnect at other junctions, adding to the confusion. Tight corridors opened to vast caverns filled with stalactites, offering many more directions to choose.

Despite drawing arrows in the dirt and using rocks as waypoints, it didn't take long before they found themselves hopelessly lost. They double-backed often, only to arrive somewhere unknown to them. Nathan, frustrated and

tired, jammed the torch into a crevasse and removed his rucksack.

"I guess if you're going to hide your worldly treasures in a cave, it should be hard to find. But this is ridiculous," Nathan muttered while rubbing the back of his neck.

Brohm grunted his agreement, swigging from his waterskin, and then passed it to Nathan. "I reckon we should find our way back and try again, more slowly this time."

After drinking his share, he handed it back to Brohm and shouldered his sack. They searched for clues they'd left behind, only to find none. No matter which way they turned, it seemed to lead them farther away from their goal. Untold hours passed, and while Nathan didn't let it show, he felt a tough ball of unease lodged in his gut. Brohm's face didn't hide that his concerns were similar. Nathan saw fear, exhaustion, and anger at their situation. But then his expression shifted to surprise.

"What's that?" Brohm asked, pointing ahead.

The torchlight never penetrated far into the gloom, which contributed to their dilemma, but now a reflective surface shone in the dark. Both men rushed forward and a sudden waft of death assailed their nostrils. It was an armoured man, sprawled face down on the narrow path, his metal helmet the cause of the reflected light.

Nathan coughed. "Gods, what a reek."

Covering his nose, Brohm nudged the body over with his boot, revealing a half-decomposed corpse teeming with bugs. Retching, he stumbled farther along the corridor, pulling Nathan with him. Once far enough from the body, they coughed and gasped for air.

"Ugh, the smell is still in my nose," Brohm complained.

"Looks like we're not the only ones looking for the treasure," Nathan said. "But how did he die?"

"I'm not going back to find out. Yuck!"

After recovering, they continued down the corridor, and a small object on the ground caught Nathan's eye. A gold coin. A few steps farther revealed another, and still more.

"Somebody left in a hurry, yuh?" Brohm said.

"Maybe . . ."

As they followed the trail of coins, Brohm gathered and shoved them into his trouser pockets. Ahead, the corridor split two ways, but the correct passage was obvious.

"I see a lot more gold," Brohm said.

They entered an alcove, filled with coins, jewels, and artifacts.

"This has to be it. I can't believe we found it!" Nathan exclaimed.

"We should be careful," Brohm said quietly, covering Nathan's mouth. "We don't know who—or what—killed that guy."

Nathan nodded at Brohm's careful advice. "I admit it's strange that this treasure was never fully recovered."

"We still don't know what really happened here. Could've been something so terrible that it wasn't worth the risk, yuh?"

Both men stood still a moment, listening to the silence.

"Did you have to say that, Brohm? You're creeping me out."

"Sorry."

"Let's just find this amulet and get out of here."

They searched through jewel-encrusted cups, daggers and swords, rings and other jewellery. Much of it was tarnished with age.

"I think I found it."

Brohm pointed at a simple necklace with a tiny jewel at its end. It looked out of place among the lavish items surrounding it.

"I don't know. I pictured something a little more . . . fancy."

"Magick is magick, yuh? Doesn't really matter what it looks like."

Brohm crouched, fumbling to pick up the fine chain with clumsy fingers. Once in his grasp, he nervously glanced around the room, bracing himself from an attack by some unknown force. However, once confident nothing was going to happen, he held it up in the light to examine it further.

"Keep it," Nathan said. "We'll take anything else we find and Morgana can choose what she needs."

Brohm tucked the necklace into his pocket and continued the search, digging under coins and moving items aside. However, after fifteen minutes of searching, they came up with nothing.

"What if someone's already taken it?" Brohm pondered.

"That's always a possibility. Come on, let's get outta here."

"What about us?"

Nathan stopped to look at him. "Huh?"

"We've gone through the trouble to get down here. We should take some of this coin for ourselves. We're gonna need it."

"I admit, it crossed my mind. But I keep thinking about that dead guy out there. What if this stuff is cursed? What if something chased him, and he ran out in fear, dropping the coins he took."

The big man swallowed hard. "Cursed?"

"I don't know. Maybe he was with someone else, and they killed him."

Brohm didn't seem convinced. "A test then. Follow me."

He stepped into the dark passageway, and Nathan hurried to follow. They continued onward, not heading back the way they'd come. Nathan assumed Brohm didn't want to pass the body unless he had to. The feeling was mutual.

After twenty metres, Brohm stopped abruptly and stood silent, waiting for what he likely considered was the inevitable. Yet nothing happened.

"I guess it's safe to take," Nathan said.

"I reckon so."

They returned to the alcove and gathered as many coins as they could carry. Even with their pockets and Nathan's rucksack considerably weighed down, it barely made a dent in the pile left behind.

"You know, if we're careful with it, this gold could last us a long time," Brohm said. "Make for an easier life together."

"I . . . I guess we never really talked about that. What happens when this whole thing is over?"

Brohm scratched the back of his head, avoiding his gaze. "Well, I figured it was clear."

"What?"

"I reckon we make a good team, yuh? I mean, if you'll have me, I'd like to stick together."

Even in the cold chill of the cavern, a warm glow filled Nathan, and his heart ached with joy. "Of course I want that."

Brohm offered a shy grin. "Well then, c'mon. I'd rather spend time with you anywhere but here."

The alternate passageway from the treasure room was unlike the rest of the cavern system, as though maintained for easier passage. In the distance, a faint sound of rushing water broke the silence within the forgotten corridors.

"You hear that?" Nathan asked.

"Yuh. I reckon an underground stream."

They advanced toward the sound, reaching a massive grotto with a wide channel of flowing water blocking their path to the other side.

Brohm raised the torch into the air. “Can you see a way across?”

“Yeah, there’s rocks rising out of the water,” Nathan said, pointing them out. “We should be able to step across.”

“Okay, I’ll go first to make sure it’s safe.”

The sudden wallop of déjà vu hit Nathan in the gut as Brohm passed him the torch, knowing without a doubt this was his dream. While Brohm crossed the dark waters, Nathan scanned the chamber, looking for the daemon he knew to be lurking in the craggy shadows.

“Okay, your turn,” Brohm said. “But be careful. That one rock is really slippery.”

Nathan’s feet refused to move from the overpowering fear of his prophetic dream. “I can’t. I’m going to slip and the torch is going to fall in the water.”

“What are you talking about? If you know you’re going to slip, you can be prepared for it. Just be careful.”

The memory of Morgana came to mind of how his dreams were just one possible future. He knew what to expect now, so maybe he could change the outcome. Drawing a deep breath, he tentatively stepped onto the first rock without incident, and peeking over his shoulder affirmed no sign of the daemon.

Carefully hopping the series of rocks in succession, he stopped abruptly at the last one. Submerged underwater, the surface was slick and slimy. Brohm stood scant metres away, reaching with a hand just out of reach. Nathan dipped his boot into the water, testing the rock before placing weight onto it.

At that moment, a chunk of crumbling rock fell behind him. He spun around in terror to face his nightmare, but the extra heft in his rucksack threw him off balance. Despite waving his arms madly to right himself, the delicate purchase he had on the slippery rock gave way.

“Careful. Nathan!”

Brohm reached out to grab his flailing arms, but to no avail. Nathan splashed into the chilly water, falling into a hidden pit much deeper than he anticipated. Even holding up the torch as high as he could wasn’t enough to save the flame, and his world quickly transformed to a place of cold and darkness. Sputtering and disoriented, he grasped out in all directions in search of the stream’s edge.

“Brohm! Where are you?”

A large hand grasped his arm and his immediate reaction was to pull against it.

“Give me your hand!” It was Brohm’s voice, nearly hysterical.

Nathan reached out into the dark to find his other hand, and with a hoist, Brohm pulled him from the icy waters. Coughing, he peered about, fearing to see red eyes in the dark. There was only blackness, and relief swept over him.

“Are you okay?” Brohm asked.

“Yeah, just f-freezing.”

They stumbled in the dark, finding the nearest rock wall from memory. Nathan collapsed against it, and Brohm sat beside him, quietly whimpering.

“Brohm, I . . . I’m sorry.”

“It’s so dark. Gods, I can’t see a thing.”

Nathan angrily ripped the wet rucksack off his back, cursing its weight, and held Brohm’s quivering body. “I’m here,” he whispered.

“I’m trying to fight it,” he said, taking his hands and crushing them in panic.

“You’ll be okay.”

A few minutes passed in silence. Brohm's grip loosened, and his breathing slowly returned to normal. "I don't know how you do it. You always manage to bring me back."

Nathan felt Brohm's warm hand caress his chilled face, yet it did nothing to alleviate the profound dread and dismay within himself. They had no chance to escape this place. This would be their tomb.

It was then he felt the wet torch resting against his leg.

"I need my tinderbox," Nathan said.

Riffling through his pack, he discovered the contents surprising drier than expected. The familiar tin brushed against his hand and he took it, along with the blankets. Loose coins spilt out in the process. Those same damned heavy coins that caused him to lose his balance. Maybe they *were* cursed.

"What're you doing?" Brohm asked.

"It's a long shot, but I'm hoping whatever magickal properties this torch has might allow a spark to re-ignite it," he said, handing the blankets to him.

He struck flint against steel. The brief flashes fought against the oppressive darkness. Sparks flew, but hissed dead as soon as they hit the soggy torch.

Brohm sighed. "It was worth a try. Maybe it'll work when it's dried out."

"Yeah, but how long is that going to take?"

Silence answered him. Leaving Brohm to his thoughts, he undressed out of his wet clothes, wringing the excess water out. While laying them flat on the ground, he shivered uncontrollably and his teeth chattered.

"Nathan, come here."

Guided by Brohm's beckoning voice, he knelt at his side. Strong hands pulled him under a blanket, and to Nathan's surprise, found the big man's naked body waiting for him, heat radiating from his thick form. The other blanket lay on the ground to protect them from the cold.

Brohm held him close in a tight embrace, holding his head to his massive chest. The warmth enveloped him, and in short time, his shivering ceased. For the briefest moment, Nathan allowed himself to forget everything, and simply enjoy being held, protected.

Yet despite his wishes, the despair returned. In all their attempts to escape capture and death, he was their own worst enemy. His mistake cost them everything.

Brohm soothed him, as though sensing his guilt. Even now, the big man dauntlessly stood his ground against the all-encompassing knowledge that they were dead men. Nathan allowed that courage to seep within his own self, to accept his end with the man he loved.

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

Sleep had taken Nathan, however he'd been unable to recall when. He found himself on his side, Brohm holding him close with a protective arm against his chest. He couldn't deny feeling Brohm's manhood pushing against the small of his back, and wished they were in a warm bed instead of an abandoned cave.

It was then he realized a glowing blue representation of the cavern was discernible. Although quite dim, every crevasse was perfectly lit, and rubbing his eyes did nothing to alter the hallucination.

"Brohm, wake up."

The big man grunted and groaned, shifted slightly, yet remained asleep. Nathan fought against the hefty arm holding him down, and turned to shake him awake.

"Brohm!"

"W-wha?"

Brohm suddenly sat up straight upon seeing the blue emanations.

"I can . . . I can see!" he said with excitement.

"So it's not just me?" Nathan examined the wall, poking at the small blue dots growing there, and luminescent goo remained on his finger.

"You reckon it's poisonous?" Brohm asked.

"I've no idea, but at this point, does it really matter? Let's get dressed."

Nathan gathered his belongings, and although his clothes were still cold and damp, he didn't care. They set on their way, heading away from the stream. The blue glow continued unabated, and despite the passage snaking its way left and right irregularly, it only offered a single route with no offshoots.

"Do you hear that?" Brohm asked, grabbing Nathan's shoulder to stop him, and cupped a hand to his ear.

Like a distant dream, Nathan thought he could hear the crash of waves upon a shore.

"The sea."

Nathan rushed on with hope swelling in his chest, yet as quickly as it came, the sight ahead unceremoniously ripped it from his being. The blue light was dimming, however glancing back, they found the walls still glowing strong. They shared a worried look, and stepped forward until reaching a tight corner. Beyond was inky blackness, halting their progress.

"You've gotta be kidding me," Brohm cried, collapsing to his knees.

"The sound of the sea is clearer," Nathan said. "This has to be the way out."

"But it's so dark. I—"

"You've fought this every time. You can do it again."

Brohm regarded him with a distraught frown, yet underneath, even in the dim light, Nathan caught sight of his spark of determination.

"I'll lead," he continued, offering a hand. "All you need to do is hold onto my pack, okay?"

Brohm gazed down the dark corridor, and then back to Nathan. At last, he took his hand and pulled himself up. "Alright, let's get this over with."

Using the sound of the waves for guidance, Nathan edged his way into the dark passageway. After each step, he probed ahead for broken ground or overhead obstacles. Sometimes stepping forward would result in a tug on the straps of his rucksack from Brohm's grip holding him back. The slow progress was exhausting, but his confidence bolstered each time the sea crashed just a little bit louder.

"I see something," Brohm said as they rounded another corner.

Nathan glanced up. Slivers of white light slashed across the rock wall, and a fresh breeze cooled his sweat-streaked face. With a clear path before them, they both scrambled toward the light.

Shielding their sensitive eyes from the glare, they emerged from the cavern to find themselves on a precarious narrow path, leading up a sheer cliff. Below, the tremulous sea roiled, deafening them with the crash of the tide. Sticking close to the wall, they climbed up the jagged ledge, and upon reaching the top, recognized the spires of Tornel Keep in the distance. Both men looked on incredulously.

"That cave was a back door," Brohm said.

"A huge security problem, if you ask me," Nathan added.

"Yuh, but if we wanted to get more of those coins, it a hells of a lot easier to go that way."

"Go *back* in there? After everything that's happened, you're the last guy I would've expected to make that suggestion."

Brohm shrugged. "Well, it's a lot of coin."

The hike through the tall grass proved an easy task, and by late morning, they arrived at the courtyard. While Brohm went to check on the horses, Nathan sat on the colonnade steps to inspect the contents of his heavy rucksack.

A sudden flapping sound, perhaps a large flag in a strong wind, caught his attention. Peering up the courtyard walls revealed nothing out of the ordinary, and no standards hung from the rusty flagpoles. The sun beamed down on his face and warmed his damp clothes. He closed his eyes and smiled, feeling good after being cold for so long. Upon returning, Brohm found Nathan had pulled everything out to take inventory, and was munching on a biscuit.

"The food survived?" he asked.

Nathan nodded and handed him the small sack.

"I'm starving!" the big man managed to say before cramming his mouth full.

Nathan laughed, choking on the dry bread and took a swig from his waterskin. They ate in silence, listening to the distant birds singing, and the ever-present sea. It was then Brohm noticed the sizable pile of coins on the top step.

"Whoa, we took a lot more than I thought," he said.

"Yeah. If we get out of this mess, that should hold us for quite some time."

"What do y'mean *if*? All we need to do is give Morgana the amulet."

"We don't even know if that's the one she's looking for."

Brohm slumped his shoulders. "Y'know, sometimes you're a real downer."

"I just . . . don't want to get my hopes up. Sorry, I didn't mean to bring you down."

The big man sighed, pulling out the coins from his pocket and added them to the pile. "Well, I reckon if things don't work out, having this coin'll help either way."

"You never fail to find the best side of a bad situation," Nathan said. "An admirable trait."

Brohm beamed him a smile. "Say, I was wondering, how'd you know you were gonna slip in that stream?"

Nathan found himself thrown off-guard at the sudden memory. "I, uh, dreamt about it."

"You mean the nightmares you've been having."

Nathan nodded.

"There was something else though. Something you were afraid of."

Nathan nodded again.

"What was it?"

"I don't want to talk about it, Brohm."

"Why not? After all, it didn't happen."

"Sure, but that doesn't mean I want to recount it."

Brohm pursed his lips, not hiding the fact that he wanted to know more. "How bad could it be—"

Nathan huffed and blurted it out. "In my dream, there was a daemon down there."

"A daemon?"

"That was the second time I saw it. The first time was at your farmhouse."

"At the farmhouse? What do you mean?"

"I had a vision of it, and I swear I was awake when it happened too."

"But it *had* to be a dream. Daemons aren't real," Brohm said in an attempt to convince himself.

"Now you understand my concern. And to top it all, it keeps telling me I'm getting closer to it."

It was clear Brohm didn't like where the conversation was going, and he stood up, dusting his hands clean. "There's a few empty saddlebags that should be able to hold all this coin. I'll be right back. No more talk of daemons, yuh?"

"Hey, you wanted to know."

"And now I'm regretting it."

Nathan chuckled, watching him head toward the stables. More specifically, he marvelled how his trousers hugged his behind so well. Once he was out of sight, Nathan lay back on the steps and closed his eyes, soaking in the sun, conceiving the prospect of simpler times where he didn't have to watch his back. He tried to imagine spending his life with Brohm, but realized he wasn't sure if the big man was the type to settle down.

Another flapping sound interrupted his daydream, followed by an earthshaking thump. He opened his eyes to find the daemon on the other side of the courtyard. Frozen in fear, he blinked, unable to believe what he beheld. The beast, crouched from landing with wings spread wide, stood to its full height of nearly three metres. Nathan tried to yell for help, but his voice caught in his throat.

"I have been looking everywhere for you," it rumbled, lumbering toward him with certain menace. Powerful muscle flexed under thick inky black skin.

Nathan finally found his wits and scrambled up the steps. He pulled his dagger, yet felt woefully underpowered against such a monster.

"*BROHM!*"

It laughed at his attempt to defend himself, its smile revealing a series of sharp teeth. "That weapon will not be necessary. And I should say, rather pointless. Whether you like it or not, you are coming with me."

It reached out and easily swiped the dagger out of his grip, flying well out of reach. Nathan turned to run, but the beast grabbed an arm and yanked him off his feet.

"Nathan!" Brohm arrived from the stables, dropping the saddlebags and pulled his sword free.

The daemon casually glanced over at him. "Your knight in shining armour, I presume?"

"I'll do what I have to," Brohm warned. "Let him go!"

It let out a curiously mirthful laugh.

"Where are you taking me?" Nathan asked.

“If you must know, Lord Helmsley said you had unfinished business. He is waiting for our arrival at Brockford.”

“Helmsley? No!” Brohm said.

“He said you have been naughty,” it continued, wagging a finger in a mocking manner. “Shall we depart?”

“I won’t let you take him,” Brohm bellowed, charging the beast with sword in both hands.

It took the impact directly, but the blade bounced and skidded off its black hide. Brohm, baffled by the outcome, attempted again. This time, the daemon knocked the sword aside, caught Brohm in its clawed hand and dashed him against the stone steps headfirst.

“No!” Nathan cried.

His friend lay motionless, sprawled awkwardly, blood pooling from an unseen wound on his head.

“Time to go,” it said, pulling him close to its body.

Nathan tried to fight its grip, but even with one hand holding him, it was a futile effort. Wings spread out, the beast leapt up the side of the building, digging claws and talons into the stone wall. It leapt again, high in the air, reaching the peak of the keep. Continuing its momentum with a heavy gait, it ran past the edge and strong wings pulled them up into the air.

Nathan stared back the entire time, watching Brohm’s lifeless prone body, hoping to see him stir before falling out of sight. He never budged. Tears streaked down his cheek, and his heart ached. Filled with anger. Sadness. Regret.

And then emptiness.

With one breath, he gave in to his fate. He stopped resisting. He didn’t care anymore. Closing the door on his emotions was best. Just like before. It was always better that way, and he’d been a fool to think otherwise.

CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

Endless trees. Even from their great vantage point high in the sky, the landscape offered little else. Toward the south, the grand mountains of Dead Man's Pass peaked just above the horizon, and the north gave way to an immeasurable sea. Despite his sorrow, viewing the world from such a height fascinated him.

Upon leaving the ruins of Tornel, the daemon flew west toward Brockford. Nathan had never been there, knowing it was a heavily fortified garrison town, and held the main barracks for the army. It was the last place he'd ever want to be. But in the grand scheme of things, it didn't matter. After bearing the unpleasantness Lord Helmsley had in store for him, he'd be free of the shackles of this world. Free to sleep for eternity. He hoped the afterlife was just a parable. The thought of living on after this life was torment enough.

"Are you always so quiet?" the daemon rumbled.

Nathan regarded it with disdain. "What would you have me say? You're delivering me to my death."

"Alas, I am without choice in the matter," it said.

"No choice? How's that?"

"I am bound to my master."

"Who, Helmsley?"

"Yes."

"So you deliver me. Then what?"

"I will be free, however I cannot return from whence I came, so I will have to find a place in this world to call my own."

"You speak . . . oddly for a daemon."

"Do I? How would you have me speak?"

"I don't know. It's just not what I expected."

"Typical human," it scoffed.

Nathan couldn't believe he was having a conversation with the beast. "I've seen you in my dreams," he said.

"Have you now? From the ring?"

"How did you know about that?"

"You still radiate its power. How do you think I found you?"

Had Nathan been able to shrug, he would have.

"So tell me about these dreams?" the beast enquired.

"You spoke to me. You . . . had your way with me. You must know this."

It laughed. "Excuse me? I *had my way* with you? I can hardly believe that."

"But—"

"Whatever happened in your dreams was your subconscious' doing."

"I was told those dreams were one possible future."

"True, however to get it perfectly correct is near impossible. There are too many variables, and dreams are too fluid, too open to interpretation. And, as I said, your subconscious often gets in the way and messes the whole thing about."

"So you don't plan on . . . raping me?"

The daemon laughed heartily. "If that interests you, I know a few who would take great pleasure in ruining that body of yours."

"Uhm—"

"It is a shame you will be dead soon. I have not laughed in a long time, and you are providing me with a generous amount."

Nathan glowered. "I'm glad I could amuse you in my final hours."

The daemon cleared its throat, almost embarrassed. "I apologize for treating

your friend so roughly."

"Rough? You killed him!" he said, his emotions attempting to creep back up to the surface.

"I am sorry," it offered.

"If you really are sorry, take me back and leave."

"As I said, I cannot. I am bound to Lord Helmsley. His command is to deliver you."

"How's that possible?"

The daemon took an angry breath. "I was . . . tricked. The only way to release myself is to comply to his bidding. Your death is the unfortunate outcome."

"Why don't you just kill him instead?"

"As much as I would enjoy squeezing the life from his body, the pact does not work in that manner."

Nathan felt like he was running in circles, and gave up his attempts to reason with the daemon.

Hours passed in silence. Trees gave way to grassy plains, and the marshlands of Knavesmire Bog came into view to the south, astounding Nathan at the speed they travelled. What took days on horseback took mere hours by wing.

They continued west, following the sun until it sunk below the horizon. As the sky darkened and stars twinkled into view, Nathan caught sight of the torches and lamplight of Brockford. The town was larger than he expected, built haphazardly with roads and streets breaking off in all directions. Yet at its centre, high stone walls acted as a fortification for the garrison within, its buildings and roads square and neat in comparison.

Without warning, the daemon tightened its grip, and Nathan's stomach lurched as they descended, gathering speed. The town grew in size at an alarming rate, to a point where it seemed too late to slow down. Yet the beast widened its wings, slowing their descent in time to land on top of a watchtower. The two troops standing guard jumped back in surprise, rearing their pikes toward the daemon.

"Tell your lord of my arrival," it demanded.

The two men nervously squabbled until deciding who would leave their post. Watching one trooper bolt down the steps, the daemon lowered Nathan to the ground, forcing him to his knees. The remaining trooper, unsure of its intentions, held his raised pike in place, literally quaking in his boots.

In short order, a small contingent of men arrived with torches, Lord Helmsley appearing in the centre of the group. He stepped forward without fear, flanked by two troopers, holding a flame close to Nathan's face.

"Yes, this is him," he said. "You thought you could escape?"

"I gave you a good run for your coin, I'm sure," Nathan said, offering a defiant smile.

"Insolent to the end, I see."

Lord Helmsley signalled, and three men came up from the rear. Swords in hand, they marched him away from the daemon, and a quick search for weapons revealed he had none. They bound his hands and knocked him to his knees again, a sword at his back as warning to stay put.

"I have fulfilled my contract," the daemon stated.

"So you have. I thank you for your co-operation."

"Understand, you did not have my co-operation," the beast rumbled. "I was your dog fetching a stick. I have retrieved it and returned."

Helmsley regarded it through narrow eyes.

“My task complete, I will be on my way,” the daemon continued, turning to leave. “I bid you good evening.”

“Hold! That was never part of the deal,” Helmsley said.

“Excuse me?”

“That body is not yours to keep. It belongs to Theodrik, my alchemist. I demand you leave his body, and return to wherever you came from.”

The daemon scoffed. “Clearly you do not understand that this Theodrik sacrificed his body to bring me here.”

Lord Helmsley gasped in surprise. “What? He spoke nothing of this.”

“Either he was a very loyal subject, or a fool. No matter, he was destroyed in the process of channelling me here. I took his body, and used the last of my power to transform it to something more—how should I put this—appropriate to my stature.”

“I’ll not have you free to terrorize our land and my good people. You will remain here.”

“You no longer have any hold on me, and while I may be without power, it does not mean I am powerless,” the daemon said, flexing its muscle to prove its point.

“Men! Take him down!”

The troopers hesitated, glancing about to see who would lead the attack.

“My Lord,” a man of rank said. “I’m not sure we have the force necessary to take on . . . a daemon.”

“Lieutenant, I gave you an order.”

“I see your men have more sense than you,” the beast said. “Or perhaps you should lead by example.”

Lord Helmsley took the bait, grasping the sword of the nearest trooper and ran headlong toward the daemon. He managed a single swipe, bouncing off its leg before the beast took him by the throat, lifting him off his feet. With its free hand, it grabbed the flailing sword and pulled it from his grasp, tossing it aside. The troopers, seeing their leader under attack, forgot their fear and surrounded the beast, ready to strike.

“The pact that bound me has ended. You have no control over me. I offer to leave peacefully. Call them off. This is your last chance,” it warned.

“To the hells with you.”

“Believe me, I wish I could.”

“Kill it!” Helmsley cried.

Blades came from all directions in an attempt to slice and pierce, yet none could break through the daemon’s thick skin. Offering a sickening grin, the daemon tightened its fist around Lord Helmsley’s neck, severing his head from his body with a horrible squelch. The men stepped back in shock.

“Anyone else?” it asked.

Silence answered.

“I thought not.”

The daemon turned its attention to Nathan, offering a solemn nod. “I hope the death of your captor brings you some kind of closure.”

“Wait, take me with you,” Nathan cried.

It ignored his request, lumbering the short distance off the edge of the spire, and disappeared into the night. Everyone stood still as stone, listening to the beating of leather wings fade away.

“Lieutenant?” one man said.

“Uh, get a runner to Knight-Commander Garricus. He must return immediately,” the lieutenant said.

“What of the prisoner?”

"We'll hold him in a cell until Garricus arrives. Take all precautions. We can't afford to lose him now."

A boot in his side told Nathan to stand. He did, and two troopers led him to the dungeon.

"Who's this sod, eh?" the gaoler asked.

Nathan recognized him from his dream. The older man with a round belly protruding from his greasy leather apron.

"This is the man that Lord Helmsley, bless his soul, had been looking for," the trooper said.

"What happened?"

"You wouldn't believe me unless you saw it with your own eyes."

The gaoler was astonished. "Lord Helmsley's dead?"

"Yeah."

"This fucker do it?" he asked, pointing an accusing finger at Nathan.

"No. We've been ordered to lock him up until Garricus gets back."

"Aye? I'll make sure he doesn't go anywhere. Follow me then."

The gaoler led the way, swinging a wide ring of keys on a finger. They arrived at a large cell Nathan recognized as well. Of course, Brohm wasn't with him to share in his fate, offering him a small comfort.

"Strip him, and we'll get him locked up tight."

Nathan offered no resistance while the troopers carried out the order, throwing his clothes into a heap in the corner. They locked his wrists into manacles hanging from the ceiling, and shackles around his ankles. A pulley system tightened the slack on the manacles, holding his arms up.

"There we go. You ain't going nowhere," the gaoler said once the men completed their task. "Ey, can I have fun with this one?"

One of the troopers offered an uncomfortable look. "That's your business. Just don't you dare kill him without orders. Otherwise I'm sure it'll be *your* head."

"Aye. Thank'ya boys."

Disturbed, the two men left quickly, and the gaoler came in close.

"So what'd you do to get Helmsley so pissed off at ya?"

Nathan didn't offer a response.

He threw a suckerpunch into Nathan's gut. "I said what'd're here for, boy?"

Nathan doubled over as much as he could against his restraints, attempting a breath after having the wind knocked out of him. Pulling himself up on the manacles, he could feel them already cutting into his skin.

The gaoler brandished a fist in warning. "Well?"

"Do you get off fighting men who can't fight back?" Nathan asked with a mocking smile.

That earned him a solid punch in the face, knocking the smile away. Blood dripped from his nose onto the stone ground.

"When I'm done with you, this cell'll be slick red."

"I look forward to it."

He landed a final punch to the face before turning to leave. Removing the torch from its sconce, he stepped out and shut the iron gate, locking it. Without so much as a word, he walked off, leaving Nathan in the dark to contemplate his remaining days.

* * *

Nathan awoke to the sound of keys jingling on a ring. There was no way to tell how much time had passed, but he assumed it was morning. His body was

numb with cold, and he couldn't feel his hands. Attempting to swallow was painful. What little saliva he had left felt like sharp rocks scratching his throat.

Torchlight lit the corridor, then the gaoler came into view. Another man stood behind him, peering into the dark cell while the gaoler unlocked the gate.

"Brought a friend with me today to join in the fun. You can call him Rowe."

Nathan squinted at the light of the torch as he placed it in a sconce. Rowe was young compared to the gaoler, wearing a similar leather apron.

"He's an apprentice of sorts," the gaoler continued. "Learnin' the tricks of the trade. You'll be his first live subject."

Rowe, smiling nervously at his introduction, entered with two buckets. One filled with tools, the other with liquid, maybe water. Nathan was parched, and seeing it slosh about was torture enough. The gaoler pulled a bundle from the tool bucket and rolled it out on the table, revealing a series of small knives and other sharp instruments tucked into pockets. Nathan knew this was coming, but that knowledge didn't help to quell the fear building in his chest.

"The most important thing to have is patience," the gaoler said to Rowe. "That, and a tempered hand. You want him to last as long as possible. Too much pain at once will have him fainting. We don't want that, now do we?"

"No, Master Ayers," Rowe said to the gaoler, shaking his head.

"That's right. It's all about reading their state. Eyes will tell you much of what you need to know."

Ayers reached across the table, and for the first time, Nathan noticed various restraints and tools hanging on the wall. The gaoler grabbed a multi-tailed whip from the assortment and handed it to his charge.

"Let's see yer form. Give him a few hits across the chest."

Rowe stepped up to Nathan, his face filled with a dark curiosity, yet his awkward stance belied his timidity. He swiped the whip across Nathan's chest with the strength of a child, seemingly apprehensive to hurt him.

"What was that?" Ayers cried. "*Hit* him!"

Rowe tightened his grip and swung again, harder this time. It stung, but was tolerable.

"Good. Again."

The young man swung harder still, putting his body into it. The tails bit into Nathan's skin, and he bared his teeth against the pain. Rowe, not requiring any more encouragement from Ayers, continued to swing in earnest, watching him twitch uncontrollably with each hit. Nathan tried hard to keep silent, not wanting to give the men any satisfaction, but Rowe seemed intent on getting a reaction.

After many swipes without success, he aimed lower to strike his groin. Nathan cringed against his restraints in anticipation of what was to come next, but Ayers came from behind and grabbed Rowe's arm before he could make his move.

"Whoa, slow down there, boy. We just started. You don't wanna go after the delicate bits until a lot later. Only until you've run out of options, y'here?"

Rowe lowered the whip, panting and examining his work. Angry red welts covered Nathan's chest, burning in the cold.

"What information are we extracting from this prisoner, Master Ayers?"

"From this sod? Nothing. We're just using him for your training."

"What did he do to get locked down here?"

"A good question. I've been told what he did, but I'd like to hear it from his own mouth," Ayers said, glaring at their prisoner.

With great effort, Nathan lifted his head to consider the two men. "Will you

leave me be if I do?" he asked, his voice hoarse.

Ayers let out a laugh, immediately answering his question.

"Well then fuck you both!"

"There y'go, boy," Ayers said. "See if you can find out what he did to get down here."

He took the whip from Rowe's hand and handed him a set of studded leather gloves.

"Why don't you try beating it out of him," he suggested.

Rowe donned the gloves, flexing his fingers to test the fit. "Tell us what you did," he said in an attempt to be menacing, but lacked the presence to do so.

Nathan chuckled under his breath, and Rowe responded with a stinging jab across the face, followed by an undercut to his belly.

"Tell us!"

Rowe waited for an answer that didn't come. A left hook knocked Nathan's senses, and he saw stars.

"You don't want to hit him in the head too often," Ayers guided. "You'll knock him unconscious."

Rowe swung a right fist into his kidney. Nathan did his best to hold silent, muffling a whimper from the pain. A smile crept across Rowe's face and swung again in the same location.

"Are you going to talk?"

"W-what's the point?" Nathan mumbled.

Another swing across the face broke the skin. Nathan's vision went hazy, and blood oozed from the wound, down his face and off his chin.

"Maybe we should try something a little more . . . painful," Ayers said, perusing the tools laid out on the table. "If you flay the skin and rub in something that stings, that works good."

Rowe joined him at the table, removing the gloves and chose a small knife from the selection.

"These blades aren't very well kept, Master Ayers."

"No, you don't wanna use a sharpened knife. If the cut is clean, it doesn't hurt so much. You want it to tear through."

Rowe returned to Nathan with the blade, and after a moment of hesitation, cut a long slice across his chest. Nathan shook from the pain, but held his tongue. A second cut followed the first, and blood pooled onto the floor. Ayers stood beside Rowe with a pouch in hand.

"Here. Sprinkle some of this into yer hand and smear it into the wound."

Rowe slid the bloodied knife into a slot in his apron, and dumped a small amount of the curious white powder into his hand. He jabbed his fingers into the ragged cuts. Nathan found his voice, bellowing out for all to hear. Searing pain slashed across his chest, as though lit from the fires of the hells, and quickly sunk deeper into his lungs. Screaming in excruciating agony, he expected to see liquid flame spew from his mouth.

Both men stood back with smug smiles, watching their handiwork in action. The burning continued for minutes longer before finally ebbing away to a dull ache. With no strength to stand, he hung from his manacles, sobbing, tears streaking his face. He just wanted it all to end.

"Are you ready to talk?" Rowe asked, his voice low.

His throat raw from screaming, Nathan tried to swallow, but his dry mouth offered nothing to sooth the pain.

"I did it," he managed, barely a whisper.

"What did you do?"

"I killed him."

"Who?"

"*Ayers!*" a voice barked from the corridor.

The gaoler cursed under his breath, taking the knife from Rowe's apron and hastily placing it back with the rest of the tools before wrapping up the bundle. A man with two troopers trailing behind him appeared in the doorway.

"Ayers, what in hells is going on in here?"

"Lieutenant—"

"Who gave you the authority to do this? Why are you interrogating this prisoner?"

"Sir, I'll take full responsibility," Ayers grovelled.

The lieutenant glanced over at Nathan. "He better not be dead."

"No, no. He's quite alive." Ayers poked Nathan's bloodied chest, causing him to stir from his stupor and utter a groan.

"Get him cleaned up and into a proper cell. If I find you torturing him again, it'll be your own head on the block. Is that understood?"

"Sir."

"When Knight-Commander Garricus gets back, I expect this prisoner to be able to stand on his own two feet. So no starving him either."

Without wasting another moment, the lieutenant turned and left. The two curious troopers poked their heads in before hurrying back in tow. Ayers let out a long angry sigh, eyeing Nathan through a furrowed brow.

"You're a lucky son o' bitch."

Nathan didn't feel lucky, but decided not to test it by saying so. The gaoler picked up the second bucket.

"You thirsty?"

Before Nathan could say anything, he doused him with water. The shock from the cold brought his wits back and renewed the sting of his wounds. Water dripped down his face, and with a dry tongue, lapped it up as best he could. Ayers chuckled and dropped the bucket.

He unlocked the manacles around his wrists. Rowe stood nearby in case Nathan decided to bolt, but there was no reason to. By this point, he didn't have any strength left to stand, let alone run away. Once the second shackle was loose, Nathan fell forward onto the gaoler. He pushed him onto the stone floor and opened the shackles around his ankles.

"Help me with this sod," Ayers said to Rowe.

An arm over each shoulder, they dragged Nathan into a nearby cell, dumping his body unceremoniously onto a pile of soiled chaff. Nathan fell in and out of consciousness, his vision reeling every time he opened his eyes. He thought he might vomit, and decided it was best to keep his eyes closed.

He just wanted to sleep forever.

CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

An abrupt clang woke Nathan from his slumber. Exhaustion had finally taken its toll, offering a dreamless sleep. The cold damp had sunk into his bones, and sporadic, uncontrollable shakes sapped what little strength he had left. Feeling had returned to his arms, but his hands remained numb. His surroundings offered no clue how long he'd slept. Time had no meaning in the dark.

Another clang, distant and echoing from the long corridor, brought his attention back. A gate slammed shut, followed by footsteps and the telltale sound of keys jingling on a ring.

Instinct kicked in. Feet scraped on the ground in an attempt to push himself away, but they slipped on the hay-strewn floor. Trying to pull himself up on his elbows proved fruitless. His body simply refused to comply to commands in his weakened state. Torchlight lit the corridor, and panting from exertion, he lay prostrate, awaiting his fate.

"This way, m'lady," the gaoler said.

Nathan turned his head toward the gate to see a woman in white robes. Beside her, Ayers held a torch and was fumbling with his keys, unlocking the door. It squealed in protest as it swung open, and the old man stepped through, placing the torch in a sconce to light the filthy cell.

The woman stepped in gracefully, carrying a bundle of white cloth with various vials and bottles balanced on top. Her face was kind, brows knitted in concern as she knelt by Nathan's side. After a quick glance at the gashes on his chest, she doused a piece of cloth with the contents from a bottle.

"I'm sorry. This will hurt." Her voice was like silk.

Dabbing the wet cloth to his wound brought a return to the pain he'd tried to forget. Each time she pulled the cloth away to blot again, he heard a faint sizzle, followed by a strangely acidic smell. The white cloth now deep red, she tossed it aside to retrieve a clean one, repeating the process. All the while, Nathan tried to bare the pain through clenched teeth.

"All done," she said, offering a sympathetic hand on his cheek.

His tense body went limp and he closed his eyes, relishing her warm hand on his face. The touch was all too brief, and he opened his eyes again to see her unravelling a wide cloth strip.

"I need you to sit up," she said.

"I can't . . ." Nathan managed, his voice ragged.

"Could you help us please," she asked Ayers.

The gaoler reluctantly stepped over, took his arms and pulled him up to a sitting position. Fire seared through Nathan's joints and he groaned in agony. Ayers snuck a grin at his expense.

The woman wrapped the large bandage around his chest, each layer tightening to sooth his wounds. The pressure made it slightly difficult to breathe, yet it was a small price to pay for the relief it brought. Once she completed her task, Ayers abruptly let go of his arms. With no control over his body, Nathan fell back, striking his head on the stone floor. The chaff only mitigated a fraction of the blow.

"I'm trying to heal this man," the woman said sternly. "I'd ask that you be more careful."

"Sorry," he lied, shrugging his shoulders.

She continued a cursory examination, but found nothing serious enough to treat. Before rising, she offered a warm hand to his face again.

"Please . . . don't go," Nathan whispered.

Her eyes filled with pity. “You poor soul.”

“You done then?” Ayers asked, impatient.

She held a moment, wiping a tear from Nathan’s face. “Yes, I’ve done what I can,” she said, gathering her supplies and rising to her feet. “He will live, but this man needs water and food. He’s weak, and will fall into a waking death soon.”

“Aye? Anything else?”

She exited the room with the gaoler close behind, taking the torch with him. “He should be clothed. The man is freezing.”

“Water. Food. Clothes. You know this is a dungeon, not an inn, right?” he said, locking the gate.

“If you need him alive, you’ll do as I ask.”

Ayers grunted.

Footsteps faded with the torchlight, leaving Nathan to his void.

* * *

Thoughts wandered aimlessly in his head as exhaustion took hold again. Random memories flashed before his eyes, mundane things that made no sense. All he wanted was death, yet even that eluded him.

A familiar sound rung in his ears. The keys again. Fear crept into his belly, knowing there was nothing he could do. Multiple sets of footsteps crunched on the stone ground, growing louder. Light appeared, and two figures stood at the gate. Ayers and his apprentice Rowe, carrying two buckets as before.

“So, you thirsty, are ye?” Ayers asked, cackling as he unlocked the door and entered the cell.

Rowe followed behind and dropped the buckets nearby.

“Now, the nice thing about this form of torture? It doesn’t leave a mark,” Ayers said to Rowe. “Hold him down, and I’ll show you how it’s done. It’s quite easy.”

Rowe knelt and held Nathan’s shoulders to the ground. The searing pain from the weight felt like they might dislocate and Nathan cried out, yet all he could manage was a dry rasp. The gaoler used the opportunity to shove a dirty rag into his mouth, and then blanketed his face with another.

“He’s gonna fight, so make sure you’ve got him down good,” Ayers warned.

“I’m ready.”

Nathan wasn’t sure what to expect. All he could see was flickering torchlight diffused by the cloth, and then a shadow loomed over him. Something cold and wet splashed onto his face, a slow continuous trickle that soaked through the fabric, dripping into his nose and down his throat. The wet rag formed around his face and cut off his air supply. He choked, and tried to push the gag out with his tongue, but it was jammed in well. Soon it too became sodden, and dripped more liquid down his throat. The steady stream didn’t let up, and panic set in as his attempts to cough did nothing to stop it. Unknown strength suddenly burned into his muscles, and he tried to buck the weight off his shoulders.

“Hold him down!”

Rowe applied more pressure and held his head against the hard stone floor. The liquid fell at a quicker pace, and the sound of his choking intensified his panic to full-blown hysteria. He could literally hear himself drowning.

And then, as quickly as it started, the liquid ceased.

“Turn him over!” Ayers ordered.

Hands forced him onto his belly and yanked the soaking gag from his

mouth, finally allowing him to cough the liquid out. His body shook as he sobbed from the ordeal. He'd never experienced anything so horrifying, and never wanted to again.

"I killed him," he blurted between racking coughs.

"Who?" the gaoler demanded.

"Helmsley's son. I killed him. That's why I'm here."

Ayers offered a knowing smile to Rowe. "You see? They're often ready to talk after that."

"Fascinating," Rowe said in wonder. "It really is simple. Shall we try again?"

Nathan flailed his arms in an attempt to push away, but Rowe held him down as before. Ayers considered the wet rag in his hand, but then threw it aside.

"I've something else in mind," he said, reaching for the other bucket. "I was told he needs water. Let's give him some."

The gaoler knelt over Nathan. "Open your mouth."

Nathan hesitantly complied, and Ayers put the edge of the large bucket to his lips.

"Drink then."

The gaoler allowed the water to flow slowly enough to drink, and Nathan accepted it readily, quenching his thirst. He didn't understand why they were doing this, but he didn't care. It felt so good, as though life was returning to his body.

"Why are you doing this, Master Ayers?"

"Shh . . . just do as I say when the time comes."

The slow trickle of water continued for a minute until Nathan was sated. He couldn't speak, so he just closed his mouth, allowing the water to fall to the floor.

"Did I say *stop* drinking?" Ayers asked. "Open your mouth!"

"B-bu—" Nathan managed to blurt through the water stream.

"Rowe, open his mouth."

The apprentice grabbed hold of Nathan's jaw, forcing it open. Water filled his mouth, but Nathan refused to swallow. Rowe, catching on to his master's plan, covered Nathan's mouth and pinched his nose, forcing him to swallow.

"Good job, Rowe," the gaoler said, continuing the slow trickle.

Not wanting to repeat the process, Nathan continued to drink without protest, eliciting a devious grin from Ayers.

After another minute, Nathan found it impossible to swallow and began choking again. Rowe did as before to force Nathan to take it, yet he kept choking, water splashing through the apprentice's fingers.

"Okay, let him go," Ayers said, placing the half-empty bucket on the ground. "Now's the fun part."

Rowe did as instructed, standing up beside the gaoler and allowing Nathan to cough up the water that wouldn't go down. He belched, and more water came up with it.

"What now, Master Ayers?"

"He's gonna be feeling sick drinking so much water, so why don't we help him feel better?"

"How?"

Ayers manoeuvred behind Nathan and wrapped his arms around his chest, pulling him to his feet. Nathan didn't have the strength to stand on his own, and the heavy weight proved difficult for the gaoler.

"Quick, punch him in the gut."

Rowe readied a fist, and with a wide swing, delivered a devastating haymaker. Nathan gagged, heaving up water, and Rowe sidestepped it just in time.

"Again!" the gaoler said.

Another heavy swing to the gut ended with similar results, water gushing out of Nathan's mouth and nose. He coughed, hiccuped, gagged, and more water came forth.

"Again, don't stop!" Ayers cried as Nathan began slipping from his grip.

Rowe delivered an undercut to his belly, yet nothing came out. The jarring punch caused Ayers to lose his grip, and Nathan fell face first into his watery bile, coughing and gagging. Laughter filled the room.

"An interesting technique, Master Ayers."

"You like that? I just came up with it. Dunno how effective it'd be, but still fun, yeah?"

"What should we do now?" Rowe asked.

"I think we're done with this poor sod. At least for today. Grab the empty bucket and let's get outta here."

"You want to leave him with water?"

"Yeah, we need him alive."

They left Nathan sprawled on the ground in the dark. Wet, naked, and shivering cold. Finding strength, he crawled out of the puddle and huddled into a corner. He felt like an animal locked in a cage. Someone's plaything.

Keys jingled again, and light returned to the corridor. Everything seemed a blur. Had he fallen asleep? How much time had passed? There was no way he could endure more.

Ayers appeared in the doorway and chucked something into the cell. It rolled about on the floor before coming to a stop at Nathan's feet.

"Here. Eat. This bread's mouldy and hard as a rock, but it's all you deserve."

That said, he turned and left, leaving Nathan to his darkness. He welcomed it with a quiet sob.

* * *

Nathan dozed, yet the cold kept him from acquiring any useful sleep. His whole body ached, but his belly hurt the most. Attempting to swallow, he found his mouth dry again. He'd considered refusing food or water since he'd be dead soon enough. But to what end? What was he trying to prove? Why suffer needlessly?

With slow and careful movement, he rolled to his side and pushed himself up. His body screamed in anger, every muscle and joint fighting against his will to rise. Blind in the dark, he felt his way toward the bread until his fingers brushed against something hard.

The shape was right, but the consistency wasn't like bread at all. Tapping it against the stone floor resulted in a hollow wooden knock. He continued his search and bumped into the bucket, its contents sloshing about. He dipped his hand into the frigid water and took a small sip. The liquid burned down his throat, renewing forgotten pain.

He held the edge of the hard bread in the water for a few minutes before attempting a bite. Soggy, tasteless, but edible. Swallowing was an effort, yet he managed to get it down. Repeating the process was slow, but Nathan figured that was best. Eating too quickly after fasting for so long would only end badly.

He pondered how long it had been since he'd last eaten. Time was a blur, and he couldn't muster the concentration to figure it out. He recalled the courtyard of Tornel Keep. The crisp breeze. The warm sun. Brohm's lifeless body sprawled against the stone steps, blood dripping off the edge.

Nathan fought against the image. Instead, the big man's beaming face filled his mind's eye, and Nathan's heart ached with sorrow.

"Gods!" he spoke in a whisper. "My own head wants to torture me."

He fought back tears, refusing to cry. Brohm was gone, and no amount of grief would ever bring him back.

CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE

Keys jingled. Nathan woke immediately, shielding his sensitive eyes from the torchlight, fearing the worst. Ayers appeared, followed by extra footsteps punctuated with clanging armour. Guardsmen.

"It's your lucky day. We're moving you to somewhere a little more public." He unlocked and swung open the squealing door, throwing a pile of clothes at his feet. "Get dressed."

Squinting in the light, Nathan pulled himself up, surprised to find more strength than before. Meanwhile, two armed men fit through the doorway, and waited for him to clothe himself. With no dexterity in his fingers, it took a while, yet the guards stood patiently in silence. Once dressed, they lifted him to unsteady feet.

"Take him away, boys," Ayers mumbled.

Nathan found himself unable to walk on his own, but it didn't matter. The able-bodied guards dragged him out of the cell and down the corridor, with Ayers in the lead, lighting the way.

A confusing maze of dark passageways broke left and right at random intervals. At last, they reached a rough stone stairway, leading up to a wide hall with bright daylight streaming through narrow windows.

Ayers offered Nathan a wry smile. "I'll see you again once Garricus gets back in a few days. Have fun."

One of the guards pulled him up straight. "Alright then, on your feet now. We're not gonna carry you the whole way."

Nathan managed to hold himself up without their aid, and they escorted him down the hall, each arm held in a steely grip. Ayers watched a moment before returning to his dank dungeon. Arriving at a massive door, a watchman pulled back the iron bolt and opened it. Sunlight beamed in.

Nathan grunted and shut his sensitive eyes, turning his head away, but that didn't stop the two men from pushing him onward into the blinding light. The din of the garrison rung in his ears. Men talking. Heavy boots stomping on the dusty streets. The jingle of tack from passing horsemen. A blacksmith's hammer punctuated through all the noise at regular intervals. As Nathan's vision returned, he saw the high stone walls in the distance, surrounding the settlement.

The short tour ended as they reached a large square. At its centre was the gallows. Beside that, an executioner's block on a raised stand. Nathan grimly pondered which one he'd be destined for. Off to one side along the wall were a series of pillories and iron cages, a few occupied by troopers. He assumed they were serving their sentence for a transgression.

The two men led him to a pillory away from the others, bending him over to force his head and arms into the slots. With practiced efficiency, one man slammed it shut, and turned a key in a giant lock resulting in an audible click. Their task complete, they left Nathan without a second glance. His arrival brought on a small crowd of curious onlookers, but only lingered for a moment before dispersing.

Nathan shut his eyes, closing his mind to the world, relishing the small pleasure of the warm sun. The wait was almost over, and soon he'd be joining Brohm in whatever came after. Be it the afterlife, or nothingness, it had to be better than this.

* * *

The day wore on at a glacial pace. Around late afternoon, a guard came to free the few troopers in their own pillories. Nathan hoped for the same, tired of the ache in his back and legs, but had no such luck. The guard passed him as though he were invisible.

Long shadows drew from the walls, and the warm glow of dusk gave way to late evening. A man lit lamps hanging from posts around the square and down the street beyond his view. The garrison had grown relatively quiet, and the murmur of the townsfolk on the other side of the wall reached his ears.

The sky was nearly black when he caught sight of a slight figure walking toward him, carrying a small wooden bowl and cup.

"Hello," Nathan said.

Wordlessly and without making eye contact, she spooned what appeared to be oatmeal into his mouth. He ate eagerly. After finishing, she lifted the cup of water to his lips, allowing him to drink.

"Can you speak to the guard about moving me to—"

Nathan stopped himself as she turned and left without any acknowledgement that he'd spoken. He didn't think they'd leave him in the pillory all night, but was now worried that might be the case.

More time passed until he heard the slow sound of armour chinking, echoing into the square. The source revealed itself to be a guard patrolling the area. As he left the square, Nathan called out to get his attention, but received no reaction. After ten minutes, the sound of armour came again, and as soon as the patrolman appeared, Nathan tried again.

"Hey!" he called out.

Finally, the man stopped and looked over at him from across the square.

"Please, you've gotta get me out of this," he pleaded.

The guard sauntered over, slowly and deliberately. "What's th' problem," he drawled.

"I can't take this anymore. Please, can't you put me somewhere else?"

"I've no key. Anyway, it's not me job to worry 'bout you, scum."

"Could you please tell someone then? This is killing me."

The guard backhanded him across the face with a gauntleted hand. "Shut up, else I make you regret't."

Nathan licked blood from his lip, watching the man head back to continue his patrol. It was going to be a long night.

* * *

Alternating his weight from foot to foot only brought a small amount of relief as the night progressed. He tried lowering himself to his knees, but the wide beam of the pillory forced him to stay bent over. Any other position cut off circulation at his neck.

Dark thoughts of suicide crossed his mind. He was already dead, why suffer any agony to come? He could hang himself on the pillory if he wanted it badly enough. But a flame that burned within told him he'd never be able to go through with it.

Right now, he hated that flame.

A bright flash lit the entire square, catching him off-guard. Lightning. Thunder rolled overhead, and a gusty wind whipped up, bringing with it the scent of rain. Nathan groaned inwardly.

Moments later, it fell in buckets. The patrolman dashed under an awning, watching Nathan become soaked in seconds. At first, the dusty ground swallowed the rain with greed, but once saturated, swiftly turned to mud. It

was then Nathan realized his boots were slowly sinking into the muck, and lifting a foot to place it elsewhere did nothing to stop it. In fact, doing so aided the sinking process until he found himself unable to pull free. Fear spread across his body as the sinking continued unabated, and a tightness around his neck told him he was in trouble.

"Help! HELP!" he yelled out to the guard.

At first, the man did nothing. But upon hearing the panic and fear in Nathan's voice, he braved the rain and mud to investigate.

"It's strangl—" Nathan managed, attempting to turn his head in the pillory's grip.

The guard immediately saw the problem. "Gods damn it!"

He hurried around the corner, quickly returning with another man in tow. Nathan's vision faded, and was unable to make out the words they were yelling over the clatter of torrential rainfall. The figures blurred as they approached, and the lamplights doubled and swayed as though he were drunk. Then everything went blank, along with his memory.

He awoke to find the men dragging him through the mud, and then tossed him into an iron cage hanging from above. His head crashed against the bars, causing it to swing wildly. The gate slammed shut, and the two men left him, slogging their way back to their post.

The soaking rain continued unabated, but Nathan didn't care. The ache and pain was gone, and in his addled state, he fell unconscious.

* * *

He woke with a start, banging his throbbing head against the bars. His eyes felt as though daggers were piercing them. Finally focusing, he judged it late afternoon. Had he slept the entire time? He was surprised to find the ground had already dried and hardened in the warm sun.

The night before was a blur and didn't seem real, but his back and legs told him otherwise. The tight quarters of his cage didn't allow much room to manoeuvre, and his attempt for a more comfortable position proved a difficult task. The bars at the bottom of the cage dug into his behind, and he could only imagine how bad the bruising would be.

With nothing to do, and feeling strangely well rested, he watched the various men walk by, dealing with their duties. The setting sun thinned out the crowds as they had the day before. The lamp-lighter made his rounds, and then finally the woman came to him with his meal.

"Hello," Nathan spoke quietly.

As before, she didn't speak or make eye contact, only handing him the bowl and cup through the bars.

"Thank you," he said as she left.

Her step faltered, and she turned her head briefly to offer a sidelong glance before walking away. The portion was pitiful, yet helped to subdue his growling stomach.

The hour of the night grew late, hushing the distant clamour of the surrounding town. All that remained were the hoots and hollers of drunken tavern patrons heading home to their beds. Like clockwork, the patrolman passed through the square, arriving from the same street and exiting to another.

Despite his darker thoughts, he realized that the idea of escape had always remained in his deep subconscious. He'd never had the chance, and now the silent streets beckoned him to try. Lifting himself up, he examined the gate of

the cage, pulling on the rusty iron lock and testing its strength, yet found it strong and secure.

Suddenly another guard appeared from an opposite street, and Nathan backed down in surprise, causing the cage to swing and squeak. That caught the guard's attention, and he turned toward him. Nathan couldn't help but shrink against the back of his cage for fear of retaliation.

"Nathan," the figure whispered hoarsely.

That voice. He couldn't comprehend what he was hearing.

"Brohm . . . ?"

The figure lumbered closer into the dark corner, but with the helmet on, Nathan still couldn't make out details. He questioned if he was dreaming again.

"Brohm, is that you?" he whispered, a lump in his throat.

The big man's worried face came into view. He looked exhausted, and an angry gash marred his cheek. "What did they do to you?"

"B-but . . . you were dead," Nathan muttered.

"Shh, let me get you out of there." He pulled the sword from his scabbard, and gave the lock a solid hit with the pommel. The sound reverberated loudly, bouncing off the stone walls.

"Wait! A patrol's coming soon. You gotta hide," Nathan warned.

Brohm surveyed the square and hurried over to the executioner's stand. Hunched and hidden from view, he spied over the edge and waited. Minutes passed, and he impatiently rose up from his concealment just as the patrolman arrived in the square. The big man dove back to cover, armour clattering as he hit the ground.

The guard stopped, obviously hearing it, and stepped into the darkened square to investigate its source. After everything Nathan had been through, and now so close to escape, he couldn't believe such a simple error would mean their doom. A brief glint of light caught his eye as Brohm tightened the grip on his sword. There was no doubt he'd go down fighting, but he hoped it wouldn't come to that. Stealth was key at this point.

"What are ye up to, eh?" the guard asked Nathan.

"N-nothing . . ."

"Yeah, you keep it down then."

The guard turned to leave, however from that angle caught sight of Brohm hiding behind the stand.

"Oi! Whacha doin' over there?" the guard called out.

Brohm stood up and shrugged, unable to conjure a believable lie on the spot. From the tone of the guard's voice, it was apparent he knew something wasn't right.

"What's your name, soldier?"

"Uhh—"

"Sheathe that weapon and let me see your face," he demanded, storming over to him.

Brohm stepped toward him and slowly complied with the order, yet once within range, whipped his sword out in a wide arc, cutting through the air with blinding speed. The blade caught the man in the face, dark blood splashing onto the dry ground.

Before the guard had a chance to cry out, Brohm silenced him with a second stroke across the neck. He fell to his knees, and Brohm delivered a final stab to his chest, piercing the armour. With a twist, he withdrew, and the body slumped over.

The big man allowed himself one breath before dragging the body behind

the stand. With the bloody blade still in hand, he rushed toward Nathan and repeatedly smashed the lock with the hilt without care of the ruckus he was causing. The lock gave way to the assault, and Nathan opened the gate, tumbling into Brohm's waiting arms.

"We have to go," Brohm said in his ear, holding him close.

They stole away into the night, leaving the square behind.

CHAPTER TWENTY SIX

Brohm led them past countless rows of barracks containing an untold number of sleeping troops. Spying around a corner, he waited for a patrol to move out of range. Once clear, he held Nathan close, and aided him across the road to the cover of shadow.

"How do we get out of here?" Nathan whispered.

"We're almost there. That big wall ahead is the edge of the compound."

They reached another holding point and waited for one more patrol to move on.

"Go."

Brohm nearly dragged him as they rushed to the darkened space between a building and the garrison stone wall. Sidestepping into the narrow path, they came upon a hole in the wall, just wide enough to squeeze through.

"Me and the fellows would sneak outta here when things got boring. It takes us to the town," Brohm whispered as he led them through. "I was glad to see nobody patched it up after all these years."

Emerging from the hole, they found themselves in a disused alleyway.

"Help me with these straps," Brohm said, pulling off his helmet.

"How'd you manage to get this gear?" Nathan asked while assisting to shed his armour.

"When I got in, I snuck into the armoury first. I reckoned it would be a good disguise until I found you."

As soon as he was free, Brohm pulled him close again, mashing his face into his chest. Nathan cringed in pain, yet revelled to be in the arms of the big man once again.

"I can't believe I found you," Brohm said.

Nathan pulled back to examine him. "I can't believe you're *alive*! I saw so much blood."

"Yuh. When I woke up, I had a big headache and felt woozy, but was able to stop the bleeding and bandage it up," he said, turning his head to show a healing wound. "You were gone, and I didn't know what to do. But then I remembered that daemon said it was taking you to Brockford, so I gathered everything and rode west."

"What about that cut on your face?" Nathan asked.

Brohm lifted a hand to touch it, and his demeanour darkened. "It wasn't an easy ride to get here. Every road I took, I found men wanting to collect on the bounty."

The big man pulled him close again. "I had to cut every single one of them down."

"I would've done the same thing for you," Nathan whispered.

"I'm just glad I made it in time. I was worried sick to find you dead."

"I don't want to test our luck any further. We should get going, back to Morgana."

Brohm shook his head. "The town gates are shut tight so we can't leave until morning. I rented a room at Gryffen Inn where we can hide out. I know the owner. We can trust him."

"Is it close?"

"Yuh. Let's go."

The roads were empty, proving a simple task to reach the inn unseen. Inside, the few remaining patrons sat slumped in their chairs, either unconscious or on their way there. Brohm led him up the stairs, opening the door to their room. A lamp within was already lit.

"Go in. I'll be back in a second," Brohm said.

Nathan shut the door and sat on the bed, allowing himself a moment to reflect on the past few days. He'd escaped certain fate all thanks to Brohm, who'd risked his own life to rescue him. He couldn't fathom what he'd done to deserve such a loyal friend.

After removing his boots, a looking glass hanging on the wall caught his eye, and he stood to survey the damage. He winced at the face that stared back, covered with cuts and deep bruises. Pulling up his tattered shirt revealed more of the same, along with blood-stained bandages across his chest.

A light knock at the door gave him a jump. "It's me," Brohm's muffled voice called through.

Nathan opened the door to find him balancing a plate of food in one hand, and a large bowl of steaming water in the other. Upon seeing Nathan's wrecked body, he nearly dropped both.

"Oh gods . . . what did they do to you?"

"Here, pass me that," Nathan said, taking the bowl from his grasp.

Brohm placed the plate on a nearby table and turned to examine him. "Sit on the bed near the light."

A cloth and bar of soap sat in the bowl. Brohm worked up a lather, and with the gentlest touch, wiped Nathan's face. It felt good to have the grime lifted from his skin.

"I reckon we should clean those wounds."

Nathan hesitantly untied the bandages and pulled them away. The two angry gashes hadn't festered, yet were still very sensitive.

Brohm's anger simmered under the surface. "Who did this to you?"

"A sadistic gaoler. I forget his name."

"It wasn't Ayers, was it?"

"Yeah. You know him?"

"I know *of* him. Heard stories, y'know?"

"Well, whatever you heard is true. Actually, it was his apprentice who did this, under the tutelage of Ayers."

Brohm had heard enough and shook his head. "Lie down."

He cleaned the wounds with delicate precision. It stung, but was a far cry from the pain he'd endured just days earlier. Once satisfied, Brohm diligently continued to clean the rest of his chest, belly, arms and back.

"Are you hungry?"

Nathan pulled himself up to sit on the bed and eyed the plate on the table nearby, nodding. Brohm handed it over and watched him eat with a subtle smile.

"So where's our stuff?" Nathan asked between mouthfuls.

"I hid it all outside town in a nearby forest. Also, I had to leave one of the horses in Morringstone. She would've slowed me down to bring her the whole way."

Nathan nodded his understanding. "You have the amulet though, right?"

"No, it's with our stuff."

Nathan nearly choked. "What if someone finds your stash?"

"I couldn't risk losing it if I was caught in town. I reckoned it was safer in the forest."

Nathan considered his words, and then nodded in agreement. He finished his meal and placed his plate on the table. "Any idea what time it is?"

"I reckon we have a few hours before the sun comes up. We should get some sleep."

Brohm lay down on the bed, and Nathan joined him, snuggling against the

big man as he spooned him.

"I can't tell you how much I missed you," Nathan said quietly.

Brohm held him close and nuzzled the back of his neck. "I missed you too, l'il buddy. After all we've been through, I won't lose you again."

* * *

By the time Nathan had drifted off, it felt as though mere moments had passed before Brohm nudged him awake. The hint of dawn light managed its way through the flimsy curtains.

"You get dressed," Brohm said, opening the door to leave. "I'll get a second horse and come back for you. But I reckon we keep apart until we get out of town, yuh?"

Nathan lifted himself up, grogginess subsiding. "Okay. I'll meet you outside."

Brohm nodded and left, closing the door behind him. Holding up his nose, Nathan pulled on his soiled shirt, wishing for something else to wear. While buttoning up, he peeked through the window. The road below was already bustling, and he hoped it would provide the anonymity they needed.

He descended quietly into the empty common room. Behind the counter stood the barkeep, who gave him a cursory glance before returning to his work. Once outside, Nathan saw their horse tied to a hitching post, and stood beside it, hiding himself beneath the darkened overhang.

Passersby filled the streets. A few on foot, others on horses, some pulling carts. Nobody seemed particularly alert this early in the morning, but regardless, he wished he had a cloak to hide his face.

Amid the throng, Brohm's large frame came into view, riding his newly purchased mount. Catching Nathan's eye, he cocked his head, signalling him to follow. Nathan untied the horse and mounted up, easing his way into the crowd. The big man casually looked back from time to time, making sure he was following at a reasonable distance.

Upon reaching the stonewall gateway, Nathan saw what he feared. Troopers were scrutinizing those leaving town, and above on the parapet, the silhouette of archers stood ready. It was likely they'd already found him missing.

Brohm glanced back at him, unsure if they should proceed, but Nathan knew it was now or never, and offered a slow nod, signalling him to continue. The big man's expression told he wasn't keen on the idea, but followed Nathan's instruction nonetheless.

Brohm managed to pass through the stone-lined tunnel without a second glance from the troops. Nathan let out a sigh of relief, unaware he'd been holding his breath. Once on the other side, Brohm turned to look back again, brow furrowed in worry.

Nathan held a passive face as he entered the wide tunnel, ignoring the sturdy gaze of the troopers lining the wall. The urge to kick the flanks of his horse and charge away was overpowering.

"Oi! Hey you," a voice called out from behind.

Nathan pretended not to notice, and continued to stare straight ahead beyond the tunnel to freedom.

"Hey! You there, stop!"

Brohm slowed to look back when he heard the calls. Eyes locked, Nathan mouthed the word *go*, yet reading the big man's face said it was clear he wouldn't be leaving without him.

"Damn you, Brohm," he whispered to himself.

“Stop him!” the voice ordered.

Nathan tightened his grip on the reins, watching the troopers step toward him. They were just in reach, yet a split-second before Nathan planned to charge his horse through the tunnel, the men walked past him.

“Hey!” another voice yelled out in anger. “What’s the big idea?”

Nathan blinked in shock, listening as they detained the rider behind him. His horse casually carried him past the threshold, and a welcome breeze cooled his sweaty face. Brohm looked just as stunned before continuing down the road.

They kept their distance until the town was out of sight. Both remained speechless. Brohm simply offered his crooked smile, Nathan returned his own, and they continued east, side by side in silence.

CHAPTER TWENTY SEVEN

An hour down the road toward Morgana, Brohm led him south to the edge of the forest. The thick bramble forced them to dismount and head in on foot.

"It's not too far in. There's a big stump I used to hide our stuff."

The canopy overhead muted the morning light, but Brohm found his hiding place without any problem. On the far side lay Nathan's rucksack and the saddlebags, heavy with coin. Brohm dug a hand into a patch of long grass growing near the stump, revealing the delicate necklace hanging from his thick finger, wet with dew.

"We're so close to this whole thing being over," Brohm said, placing it into his trouser pocket.

Nathan decided not to remind him the amulet could simply be an expensive trinket. Instead, he rifled through his rucksack in search of another shirt. "You must be hungry," he said.

Brohm nodded, and Nathan handed him some of the cured pork and biscuits. Digging deeper, he found his shirt, yet it held something weighty. Unwrapping it revealed his dagger.

"You found it," Nathan said.

"Yuh. I reckoned you'd want it," Brohm said with a mouthful.

Nathan had no way to carry it. When the guards had returned his clothes, they'd kept the sheath that attached to his belt. But it was of little matter to Nathan. He could always have another one made.

"Thanks," he said with a smile.

After changing his shirt, they gathered their belongings, and were soon back on the road heading east, galloping toward the morning sun. The day passed uneventfully, and by late evening, the telltale stench of the bog announced their destination for the day.

"I was wondering how you reckon we find Morgana?" Brohm asked after they'd set up camp far from the road.

Nathan poked at the small fire with a stick. "Well, the pendant she gave us will help. We look for her evergreens in the middle of this stinky swamp."

Brohm seemed unconvinced.

"Don't worry," Nathan continued. "We'll find it."

* * *

Morning came, and Nathan found himself stiff and sore. Regardless, he was happy to see his wounds were healing well. Both men ate a quick breakfast, impatient to be on their way, knowing the day would be a tedious slog. As before, the marshland started innocently enough. The ground was wet, yet easy to traverse. It was a curious trap for unwary travellers. Nathan pondered if the spirits held within created the deception.

By mid-morning, the anxious underpinning of anger began to stir under the surface. Voicing their concern brought a small amount of comfort, but Nathan remained worried they'd fall to the swamp's curse again. The anger worsened once they had to dismount and guide their horses through the mud. He had resentment toward Brohm, as though all the problems of the past month were due to his presence. He took a deep breath to calm himself, but only tasted rot, and it fuelled his growing rage. He needed strength to fight it, but his greatest source was Brohm, and he couldn't stand the sight of him.

Wait. That wasn't right. A moment of clarity shone through the muck.

"Brohm—"

"Don't talk to me. Just keep going," the big man said through gritted teeth.

Nathan had already forgotten what he wanted to say, and he didn't care. His thoughts walked a fine line between reason and hate. He could remember the love he had for the big man, only to have it wiped away a moment later. Fighting the anger seemed ineffective. It returned with more resistance, and he decided giving in was the only way to survive the onslaught.

He let it happen, and relief washed over him. No, not relief. Animosity. A seething agitation that boiled under his skin. But he loved it.

Hours passed unnoticed as they revelled in their misery, and it wasn't until the sun sat in the far western sky did Nathan question what he was doing in such a gods-forsaken swamp. He recalled an old woman's face, but the details eluded him. Scanning the horizon, something seemed out of place. He saw tall shapes in the fog far out in the distance.

Trees? Evergreens.

Everything came back in a rush and he lost his balance, falling into the mud, but the distinct ring of a sword drawn from its scabbard had him to his feet again. Brohm, face twisted in anger, beared down on him with boots splashing in the fetid water.

"You slowed me for the last time!" he roared, readying his sword for a brutal swing.

Nathan instinctively went for his dagger, only to remember he'd left it in his rucksack. Brohm's blade sliced through the air. He managed to dodge the attack but fell to the ground, defenceless. The big man wasted no time and prepared to plunge the sword into Nathan's chest. Seeing the blade at its apex, Nathan could only shut his eyes and hope for a quick death.

"*Brohm*."

The familiar voice came like a gust of wind. It was rough, weathered, yet feminine. All was still, and Nathan questioned why he wasn't dead. Tentatively opening his eyes, he found Brohm in the same position, ready to thrust down, yet his expression had shifted from wrath to distress. Brohm blinked, as though waking from a dream, gazing at the sword with troubled eyes. In a fit of anger, he tossed it as far as he could, grunting from the effort. It tumbled in the air until splashing beyond his view. The big man fell to his knees and pulled Nathan into his arms in a crushing hug.

"I tried to fight it. I swear I tried," he muttered. "I'm . . . I'm so sorry."

Nathan was still trying to figure out where the voice had come from. The voice that'd saved him. As if reading his mind, Morgana appeared by their side, surprising both of them.

"You two can't handle this place very well. We should really stop meeting like this," she said with a sly smile on her face.

* * *

The hot tea burned his lips, and he blew on it before attempting another sip. Nathan was still trying to process how they'd managed to fall prey to the bog's magick again, but found himself unable to come to any conclusions. Brohm sat mute on the rug, lost in his own thoughts, staring into his mug.

"Boys, don't take it so hard. That swamp turns even the kindest person into a monster."

Brohm looked up at her, grief-stricken. "But I nearly killed him. Again."

She patted his shoulder. "I know, my big ox. But no harm came in the end. Everyone's okay."

"I guess . . ."

"You boys must be ravenous."

Something delicious was stewing, but Nathan wasn't interested. Brohm, perpetually starving, didn't move a muscle at the mention of food.

"Not hungry? I'll get a couple of bowls and we'll see about that," she said in mock defiance. "And drink that tea. It'll soothe you."

They both sipped from their mugs while she prepared their meal, and in quick order, arrived with two bowls of steaming stew. Nathan suddenly found his mouth watering at the sight, and after thanking her, tucked into it. Brohm poked at the contents of his bowl and ate a few spoonfuls, only to push it away moments later.

"So, you were gone for quite some time. Did you have luck finding the amulet?" she asked, gazing at the two men like a child impatiently waiting for a gift.

Brohm dug a hand into his pocket, and pulled the necklace free. "This is the only thing we could find," he said. "Is this it?"

The tiny jewel twisted and turned as it hung from the chain, catching the firelight of the hearth. Her eyes lit up just the same, and she held the gem in her hand, peering into its depths.

"Oh yes. This is what I seek."

Nathan noted a curious change of tone in her voice. Lust.

"We've held up our end of the bargain," he said.

She seemed lost, her smile a bit mad.

"Morgana?"

Blinking, she returned from her reverie. "I'm sorry? What did you say?"

"We found what you were looking for. I trust you'll fill your end of the bargain?"

"Of course, of course! In fact, it's already done."

Brohm glanced at his hands and to Nathan's face. "But we look the same."

She winked at him, and nodded toward the looking glass. "Are you sure?"

Both men scrambled up to peer into it. As she said, they looked like completely different men. Nathan stifled a laugh at Brohm's full head of hair.

"Weird . . ." Brohm uttered while poking at his face, bending his nose and ruffling his hair.

Nathan found himself enthralled by the changes to his own face. It was bizarre to see an alien visage staring back.

"Now, remember boys. Never talk about it. In fact, it's best to simply forget, if you can."

Brohm nodded absentmindedly, still fascinated by his own reflection.

"Thank you, Morgana," Nathan said. "You've given our lives back. Well, at least given us new lives."

"A fresh start," she said with a warm smile. "Not many are given that opportunity. Don't waste it."

The three spent the rest of the evening in quiet conversation. Nathan never brought up the amulet, but its purpose burned questions in his mind the entire time. After Morgana retired to her bedroom, the two men lay on the rug near the hearth.

"Do you think we made the right decision? Giving her the amulet without knowing what it does?" Nathan asked.

"If it doesn't affect us, I don't care. We got what we wanted, and with all this coin, I reckon we can do whatever we want."

Nathan's mind boggled at the possibilities. "You're right. Gods, I can't believe this whole ordeal is over. It feels like a dream."

"It's not a dream."

Brohm pulled him close, surprising him with a deep kiss, and Nathan took it in with passion. After a moment, the big man pulled back, leaving Nathan breathless.

"Whatever we decide," Brohm said, "all that matters is I'll be doing it with the one I love."

CHAPTER TWENTY EIGHT

A crisp breeze blew in from the open window of the lavish rented room, announcing the arrival of the autumnal season. Despite the fresh air, the room still stunk of sweat and sex. It was midday, but neither Nathan nor Brohm felt the need to rise out of bed. They'd been too busy keeping each other entertained, staying up until the early morning hours.

Nathan idly stared at the ceiling, wearing a subtle grin. Brohm lay on his side, tracing one of the ragged scars on Nathan's chest with a finger. His hand lingered a moment, before snaking its way beneath the sheets, groping between Nathan's legs.

"Let's go again," he rumbled.

Nathan glanced over incredulously at him. "You're insatiable."

"Like you're complaining."

"Well, I didn't say *no*."

The big man chuckled, turning him to his side, yet before they could get to business, a sharp rap on the door interrupted them.

"Who is it?" Nathan called out with a hint of annoyance.

"Courier, sir," a muffled voice said through the door.

With a sigh, Nathan rolled out of bed. Brohm managed to swat his behind, eliciting a laugh from him. Donning a bathrobe, he stepped over clothes strewn about on the floor, and opened the door to find a young man carrying a satchel.

"A letter for you, sir," he said, handing over a scroll with a wax seal.

Nathan nodded his thanks and closed the door, eyeing the scroll in his hand.

"I don't recognize the seal."

"Just open it," Brohm said while rising out of bed.

He sat at the table, broke the wax, and unravelled the scroll. "It's from the guild council."

"Oh really? What's it say?"

"After careful consideration, we deem your request to establish an adventurer's guild in the town of Millsfield approved. At the soonest convenience, please contact headmaster Ryan Shaw at the adventurer's guild in Croydon."

Nathan was chuffed, and looking up at Brohm, found him pleased as well. They'd spent a month determining what to do with their new life, finally deciding to start a guild branch. It offered them the promise of an exciting life without falling to the wrong side of the law.

"We'll leave tomorrow, yuh?" Brohm said. "I'm not done with you yet, and I reckon it's gonna take all day to finish up."

Nathan chuckled. "You're the boss, big guy."

Brohm stripped him of his bathrobe with a lewd grin on his face, tossed him over his shoulder, and headed back to bed.